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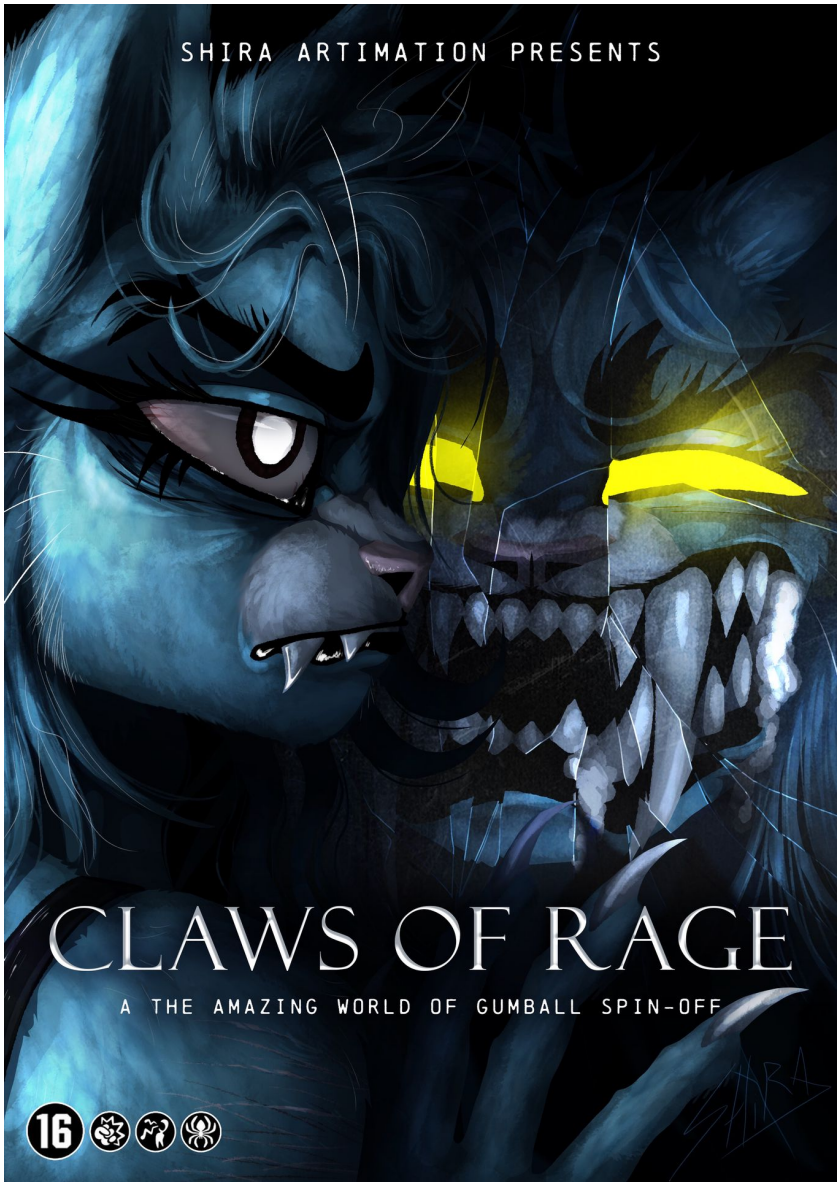
Claws of Rage - Genetic Shift

— CONTENT WARNINGS —
The following story has profanity and contains scenes and depictions of self-harm, psychological themes, supernatural and body horror, violence, gore, and character death.
Reader discretion is advised.

"She crossed her biggest line ever... Now it's a curse which will haunt her for life."


SHIRA ARTIMATION PRESENTS
CLAWS OF RAGE
A THE AMAZING WORLD OF GUMBALL SPIN-OFF
16

Chapter 1 - History

It was a Saturday evening when I spoke with the psychologist. He told me I had to try to recall moments from my past that could've potentially made an impact on who I am as a person nowadays. He said it would be the first step towards helping me with my anger that was rather hard to control at times, by trying to find where it could have come from. He never really specifically mentioned any diagnoses or labels in correlation to what I was dealing with, but I understood it was most likely too early to draw any conclusion right now. I did know myself in the sense of my anger being something that was reoccurring throughout my life so far, and the fact that I had quite bad habits or ways of coping with it in the past... It was a very emotional session, despite it only being the first with this psychologist. I had therapy before, but in my experience, barely any of those therapists took me seriously or wanted to take the time to get me to open up over time, since I've always had trouble trusting new people with such personal information about myself. I needed a therapist or psychologist who was able to click with me emotionally, was able to do their job right, and wasn't out for the money solely, but rather focused on being able to actually help the patient. I felt like I found the right psychologist, but that was just a gut feeling I decided to trust. Or perhaps it was desperation from my end, wanting to find someone who could actually help me.

But back to what that psychologist asked me – I felt like I was finally gonna be taken seriously – I needed to try opening up about my past, or what I could remember of it, and no matter how much I struggled, I started digging in the depths of my memory...

As a toddler, I was quite a sweet but silent fellow. I never really bothered anyone and was just minding my own business most of the time. My mother used to tell me I was a very social but also sensitive child, and would tell me about the dangers of the outside world at a young age. She and my father were very protective of me, and I assumed it was because I was their only child, but they said it was more about them caring deeply about me overall. I

didn't know what it meant to be 'sensitive', but I did know about being emotional a lot. I found my emotions hard to grasp most times, as they would be bigger than I could handle, but I thought that was normal. For a while, it was considered normal for most kids, from what I had heard, but later on, I would suspect something was wrong with me. I had enough friends that I could spend a lot of time with, but most of the time my parents weren't very approving of them. They preferred me hanging out with kids who were more at a 'higher level', which basically meant those who were fortunate enough to have their rich parents pay for a higher value education and extra classes or education programs. I personally didn't like those people myself, mainly because they were snobby or picked on less fortunate pupils. My parents had enough money to pay for those same programs, not that they were 'rich' per se, but they were more focused on me taking part in after-school clubs and sports. I could count the number of clubs I had to attend on both my paws, but if I had to count all of them I had throughout my whole childhood, I wouldn't have enough fingers. From karate to painting courses and from baseball to competitive swimming, I did it all. It was true that my parents expected the best for me, but also *of* me. I didn't realize how stressful that could be for me at times, but why would anyone expect me to realize that at that age? I was so young and unaware.

Anyway, besides the few friends I did click with, it wasn't long until I met Richard. We immediately became best friends, and over time that friendship grew into something more. Love. It was during our teen years at this point that we started having an established relationship, but my parents disapproved of him, as expected. He wasn't one of the more fortunate, rich individuals my parents absolutely forced me to put up with, but I couldn't care less. It was at this point too when I started having a rather rebellious 'phase', I suppose. I kept the relationship with Richard a secret from my parents until it wasn't necessary anymore, simply because he was the only one I wouldn't want to lose. Him being bullied severely got me entangled as well, as I was prone to being the second target, as I only wanted to defend him. Of course, he was very grateful for me doing so, but the emotional distress only piled up from those days on. I was being picked on for my looks, for the fact that I was often caught in my own little fantasy world, which I built in order to

cope, and simply because those bullies thought I had wrong intentions for being with Richard, disregarding the genuine love and care I felt for him. It hurt a lot, but there was nothing that could stop me from loving him ever. He was all I had during the impending tough years that followed when puberty and early adulthood hit. It was mainly thanks to him that I was still holding on so much to the last bits of positivity I had left. And by that I mean he was genuinely the light in my life I needed when the darkness began getting to me.

At age 16, I began spiralling into depression, which had various consequences like self-neglect, isolation, and picking up unhealthy coping mechanisms. At that time, it was unknown to me why I started dealing with something like that at all, but I assumed the childhood pressure from my parents played an important role in its cause. I didn't know much and still don't. It made me feel lost and like nobody understood me. I started giving up on schoolwork, simply due to a lack of energy, motivation, or the fact that my state of mind worsened, which was something that angered my parents, which piled onto the stress I already felt. My emotions were even bigger than they had ever been, and I began bottling them up, since I no longer felt comfortable with anyone seeing them. Crying was something I never successfully hid away, but my anger was a different situation. My parents were most likely the only ones who really saw my rage firsthand, which is where their claims during our feud later on came from. But the rest? I tried my ultimate best to hide it away. The anger would feel like a disease gnawing at my insides every time I held it in. I already felt depressed and hopeless enough to the point I stopped hesitating to take my coping to a lower level. At my deepest points, I would start resorting to harming myself. The urges became harder and harder to control to the point I hardly recognized myself anymore or even remembered the first times I wounded myself. As time went on, the objects got sharper. I knew it was bad, I knew the risks, I knew the health hazard of it, yet I couldn't stop. I feel ashamed to admit it didn't feel like a bad thing after a while anymore. Days would go by as I continuously spiralled into cycles of relapsing and healing. It was anger that made me want to do it most of the time. Crying it out simply wasn't enough anymore. Punching a wall made my parents mad and concerned, so it wasn't an option either anymore. Drawing

it out was something I did do, the only healthy coping mechanism I stuck with for most of the time, but it wasn't enough either. Nothing was enough. I tried so many bad things to be able to stop cutting, but it just wasn't the same. Cigarettes and weed were too expensive, and those health risks were the only ones that *did* concern me, for some fucking reason. So, grabbing the knife was the only thing I felt relief from. I hated the fact that it brought me relief; it was so embarrassing and stupid. I felt like a moron, but couldn't help it. I would go about my day and hide my damaged limbs with long sleeves and pants, hoping no one would find out. But my parents eventually did, and they lost their minds. They were concerned about me mostly, but all I could hear at the time was them not wanting me to stoop to such a low level and that they didn't expect that from me at all. They yelled about how ungrateful I was. It felt like they didn't even care about the fact that I needed help and punished me with words, even though I was already deeply punished by my own paws. I couldn't take it anymore. The piled-up anger wasn't subdued enough, and it burst out. It felt like my eyes flashed red when I got the urge to attack my parents at that moment, but with all my willpower, I forcibly moved myself away and ran upstairs to my room, where I smashed everything in my way. My claws unsheathed for the first time in my life, and tears rolled down my cheeks as I shouted until my lungs ran out of air. It was an endless chain of my parents and me angering each other at that point, and they were at their most furious when seeing the destroyed property. I snapped. I cried. And I locked myself in my room for the entire week without saying a word to them. Self-isolation would come to its peak as I didn't even feel the desire to hang out with my boyfriend Richard or my friends anymore, and the thought of everyone I cared about worrying about me couldn't snap me out of this spiral.

I waited until I was of legal age to move out, and I left my parents, unforgiving of the way they responded to my issues. I had nowhere to go, barely any money, and I absolutely didn't want to spend the nights on the streets. With only having gone to a therapist once before and with them not taking me seriously, I also didn't want to give asking for a stay at the mental hospital a try. I knew they wouldn't let me. Even with my ongoing issues, I was still pretty functional for most of my life. At least that's what I thought. It was

the high expectations that were burned into me that made me believe I had to do everything myself. I had to. Do it. Myself. Everything. Until Richard snapped me out of that way of thinking, and he was the one who came to the rescue with his small rented apartment, which he was able to afford after being kicked out by his mother. It was a cramped apartment, but I was at my utmost grateful for him letting me live with him, no matter if that was something a decent partner would do. It had been a few years at this point when I quit my first part-time job, and it was time to get another to help out with the rent and groceries. I felt like my life was worth it again after what felt like continuous misery, and I tried my best to enjoy the peacefulness of this new chapter I started. Richard, despite his lack of common sense at times, did have very decent advice, and he taught me to look at life from a different perspective and temporarily kept that raging beast within calm. It turned into the happiest years of my life, which lasted until the stress made its return in my grown adult years. Three kids and a marriage with Richard were things I was very grateful for and happy with, but nothing could brush over the fact that it brought a lot of stress back because of my many newfound duties. Richard got stuck with being a stay-at-home husband and father, due to his personal reasons, and I accepted the role of a full-time working mother, unfortunately at an office job that barely paid enough. It was manageable during the time Gumball, my eldest son, was born, and after Darwin, our adoptive son, came into our lives. But our family got stuck in poverty soon after Anais, my daughter and youngest child, was born. I felt pressure and guilt for having dropped out of college all those years ago, which was the reason why I had to resort to an underpaid job as a saleswoman at the Rainbow Factory. I always wanted to attend art school, as I found drawing a way to express myself and wanted to tell my story, but it's most likely expected that my parents never approved of that, so I got stuck trying to study for a doctorate – funny, isn't it, with the fact that my legal first name is "Doctor". I find it fucking embarrassing – but it wasn't anything even close to my interests, and I couldn't take it, which made me drop out and steal a PHD from some girl called Cathy... Not my proudest moment, but I was desperate for approval from my parents. But it was all for nothing, since my parents and I stopped talking as soon as I left their house.

Anyway, I could handle my life fine, despite the stress and poverty, the time spent with my family had always meant the world to me, and it made it worth it. A workaholic like me could take it, right? That's what I thought until the day of the incident. That one Saturday afternoon at Elmore Shopping changed my life for the worse. It was when I had entirely snapped another time after those years of being as calm as possible, and ended up chasing my family through the supermarket whilst acting like a creature with rabies, after catching Richard trying to shoplift. I most likely also snapped because of the piled-up frustration I was subduing for all those years up till that moment, and that day simply wasn't my day, whilst it was filled with a lot of agitation. My kids weren't obeying me, throwing tantrums as they only focused on their desire for sweets, along with the botched back massage that crooked my already sensitive back. I shouldn't have trusted that random clerk lady to calm me down with that treatment. I didn't even mention the fact I was born with a mild form of scoliosis, which not only gave me chronic back aches, but turned into the main cause of my spine getting contorted like that at the supermarket. But most importantly, who knows what could've happened if I actually were able to catch them... my family. I never had any intention to actually hurt them, no matter how angry I could get. It was the first time I lost control in front of the individuals I cared most about. It made me feel so horrible about myself. As if the happy decades I spent living alone with Richard went down the drain in the sense of those not having changed my tendencies to lose control entirely. Since the supermarket, I felt like things were going to shit again, but worse than it ever felt.

I ended up only telling a fraction of this information to my psychologist, especially since it was the first session with him, and because Richard came along for emotional support, whom I hadn't told about some of my more recent issues yet, as I didn't feel ready to fully open up. But that would come eventually. I could only hope for the bare minimum to get better.

Chapter 2 - A manic Monday

Monday 5.30 PM

Nicole was on her way home as it had been another workday. Throughout the day, the Watterson kids spent time at school, and as soon as they got home, they went about the rest of the afternoon in a regular manner. Anais worked on her homework and read various books that would be expected to be too difficult to comprehend for someone her age, but her extreme smarts proved otherwise. Meanwhile, Gumball and Darwin spent the rest of the afternoon doing anything *but* their homework, as their procrastination antics had become a recurring habit at this point. Neither of the brothers really cared that much about completing tasks on time, including simple household tasks Nicole would regularly give them, but they would find scoring low on tests upsetting enough to care about the day beforehand, and often spent that day studying until deep in the night as an attempt at grasping the knowledge they would need for a good grade. It was known that Nicole was eager to push her kids to their full potential, but she tried to put a stop to it after realizing she simply projected what her parents expected of her onto them. She found it rather depressing to fall into the same ways her parents used to raise her, so she had decided to change that. All she had were good intentions after all.

In the meantime, Richard hadn't done anything productive the entire day, as usual, except for preparing dinner at that moment, which wasn't usual. Nicole's shift for the day would end at five, and the pink bunny simply felt like taking a task off of his wife's shoulders for once before she returned home. And so he did, surprising her with freshly prepared spaghetti when she entered the house. The blue feline closed the door behind her and stuck her snout up in the air, sniffing the food, as her frustrated frown turned into a more relaxed expression instantly. She dropped her purse on the living room table and stumbled when sitting down on the couch, how exhausted she was from her shift. She noticed in the corner of her eye that her children started setting the table, and she

could only be surprised at how functional her family seemed at that moment. She chuckled and turned her face in the direction of the dining room.

Nicole: Preparing dinner before I arrived home? What has gotten into all of you?

Richard entered the dining room with a pan full of steaming pasta and started filling each plate as the kids sat down. Anais responded to her mother's questions before her brothers even paid attention.

Anais: What do you mean, Mom? Can't we at least pretend we're a functional family at times?

The little pink bunny laughed, and Nicole raised a brow as she smiled.

Nicole: Oh, I guess? I'm just surprised to see it, that's all.

Once Nicole joined them at the dining table, the Watterson family dug into their food and chatted here and there about their day. Nicole didn't really pay attention to the unusualness of her family having seemed 'functional', as she liked to call it, but she did notice them having been less of a pain for her to deal with, like what could be the case at times. Was it because of the incident at Elmore Shopping? Did they want to empathize with her? Or were they simply afraid something of the sort could happen again? Those were questions Nicole could've asked herself, but that simply wasn't on the table right now.

Nicole: So, what's been going on while I was at work?

Darwin: Nothing special, Mrs. Mom! Although, for a change, I didn't have that bad of a crummy Monday mood, so I guess that's new.

Darwin chuckled, and Nicole could only adore the innocence of her adoptive son that had always been present. Despite the shenanigans Gumball would often get Darwin involved in, the goldfish remained a very innocent boy himself.

Nicole: I take for granted you boys haven't done your homework

again, have you?

Gumball: You know us longer than one day, Mom.

Nicole: Fair enough. It's your own responsibility, but as you know, I don't want to spend the time and energy on forcing you to do it. It's for your own good, and you know that.

Gumball: I would rather consume pasta for dinner and not parental advice, thank you, Mom.

Nicole frowned and snapped her fingers above the table.

Nicole: Watch the attitude, young man. Anyway, what about you, Anais? How was your day?

Anais: Nothing special either, like Darwin said. But I, as usual, did my homework. Plus some extra revising on a further chapter for science class, simply because I had nothing else to do.

Nicole: Good job, sweetie. That's what I prefer to hear.

After the family finished their dinner, they all gathered in the living room. Anais went upstairs to freshen herself up, the brothers sat on the rug on the floor as they read their comic books, and Nicole joined Richard on the couch. The pink bunny noticed that his wife's back was slightly more bent today, which indicated she was very tired. Her posture wasn't ever good overall, and her office job didn't help with improving that either, but whenever she'd be tired, her already sensitive back would weaken even more. He wasn't sure if he should be pointing it out, as she most likely already dealt with enough that day.

Richard: So, how was your day, honey? You haven't told me about yours yet.

Nicole sighed deeply and forced a brief smile on her face as her eyes met his.

Nicole: It was fine... besides the fact that it was a bit more tiring than usual. Someone from the office forgot about a big portion of the spreadsheets that were due today, so I had to jump in and scoop

extra work onto my plate. I barely had any time to have a proper break. But it's okay, nothing happened that put me off per se.

Richard looked at her with a slightly worried expression, but let her continue her story before responding.

Nicole: And also, I got introduced to a new employee who seemed to try to catch my attention, but I have no idea who he is. His first main blunder on the job was most likely spilling burning hot coffee onto my shirt. He apologized, so no worries, it's all fine. It's fine.

Nicole knew she shouldn't be lying like this to her husband, but with the past weeks all having been quite rough, she didn't want to constantly vent about her work-related frustrations. But she wouldn't expect her husband to see through her, something he would usually not notice at all... The two smiled at each other until Richard revealed he saw through her lie. He noticed her tail couldn't stop waving restlessly, and the main giveaway was the fact that her claws briefly showed themselves on her paws.

Richard: Uhm, dear? I hate to point this out, but I can't help it. Are you lying?

Nicole: What? N-no? What makes you say that?

Richard pointed at her restless tail, and Nicole looked over her shoulder, then automatically turned around to hold it still.

Richard: *I noticed your claws as well, dear...*

Nicole's ears lowered as he was right.

Nicole: I- uh...

Richard: Honey, it's okay to talk about something that went totally wrong. No one is perfect, and we all have bad days. Just don't... lie about it, alright? You don't have to hide things like that away from me, and you know that.

Nicole: I know, and I'm sorry. I just don't want you to feel worried, that's all. Trust me, I'll be fine.

Richard: Even with the night shift you have tomorrow? Will that go alright?

Nicole: Yeah, it's gonna be fine. I uhm- better get some rest now, it's the least I can do to prepare.

Richard: This early? It's barely seven, darling.

Nicole: Yeah... I'm sorry, dear. The truth is that I'm exhausted, and my back is killing me.

Richard: Alright then. See you later or tomorrow. Just remember, you can tell me anything.

Nicole: I know, thank you, hun.

Nicole kissed Richard on the cheek and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her and taking a deep breath. It was true she felt utterly exhausted both physically and mentally, but she also simply didn't feel like talking about what had really been going on today. She shook her head and unbuckled the belt around her skirt, getting rid of her uniform and changing into her pyjamas. For a brief moment, she inspected herself in the mirror. Nothing was odd or anything, but she simply felt like she had to check. Her wide hips were a compliment to her overall slim figure and flat chest. She remembered how insecure she used to feel about her chest being flat, especially during the years she hadn't received her feminine curves around her lower half yet. She seemed pretty okay with how she looked nowadays, but mainly because she didn't have the time to worry about it. The blue feline then yawned as a reminder of her sleepiness and lay down on the queen-sized bed, covered herself with the blankets, and fell asleep within minutes.

• • •

After some time, which felt like only a short while, Nicole suddenly heard a voice echoing what seemed to come from afar but came closer. "Mom...? ... Mom...? Mom!" The blue feline gasped as she woke up, sat up straight in bed, and came eye to eye with her eldest son, who was calling her. Gumball sat on the bed next to her, and she shook her head a little to wake herself up further.

Nicole: What's wrong, my little angel?

Gumball: Mom, are you alright...?

Nicole: Yes, I'm fine. Why do you ask? Why did you wake me up?

Gumball: Because you've been out for the entire evening yesterday until noon just now.

The blue feline mother rubbed her eyes and tilted her head in confusion before the clock on the bedside cabinet caught her attention, which read 4PM.

Nicole: Oh my goodness, it's four o'clock already!

Gumball: Exactly. You never sleep this long, Mom. Are you sure you aren't ill or anything? You slept so deeply that I worried that you weren't even there for a moment.

Nicole: No, I'm not ill. I just had a very rough day yesterday, that's all.

The blue feline mother got up from the bed and stretched out, baring a fang as she closed her eyes in the process. She had to stop once she heard a light snap in her back, making her whimper for a second. Not that it hurt, but it scared her for a second. Anything that had to do with her back hurting or being sensitive lately felt scarier to her than it should. All because of that incident... Richard entered the bedroom after hearing Gumball and Nicole talking, and their feline son went upstairs. The pink bunny was sweet and attentive enough to bring some slices of toast with ham and a cup of coffee for her. Nicole smiled softly and sat back down on the bed.

Nicole: Ahw Richard, dear. You didn't have to.

The pink bunny kissed his wife's forehead and handed her the plate with toast after putting the cup of coffee onto the bedside cabinet.

Richard: Anything for my lovely wife!

Nicole: Richard, I overslept! I slept the entire time, even when the kids were at school! You and I both know I don't sleep this long

unless I'm ill, but I'm not ill!

Richard: I'm sorry, I didn't want to wake you up, honey. You seemed so exhausted, and you wanted to be well-rested for tonight's shift, right?

Nicole: Yeah... true. It's okay. Thank you for everything anyhow, dear.

The couple hugged and chit-chatted for a while as Nicole ate her breakfast/lunch combination before realizing the time passed on some more, ending up in her having to rush to be on time to clock in. It was slightly before dinnertime when Nicole was freshened up and prepared to head out the door again. Darwin caught his adoptive mother opening the front door and sprinted towards her before she left.

Darwin: Mrs. Mom! Aren't you joining us for dinner?

Nicole: Don't worry, dear. I'll be fine. I have to clock in very soon, so I'm just gonna grab something at the canteen as dinner instead.

Nicole kneeled on the floor and hugged her adoptive son before he returned to the dining room, where the rest of the family sat, and she left.

Chapter 3 - Mental breakdown

Tuesday 7.00 PM

It didn't take long until Nicole arrived at the Rainbow Factory's building and was able to take a bit of time to park her car. She entered with her keycard like any other shift and walked straight to the canteen, already feeling hungry again at this point. She traded a few dollars for freshly prepared tuna salad sandwiches and sat down in the lunchroom, taking out her laptop in the meantime. She knew there was a lot of work to do, so she decided to multitask and started working on the next set of spreadsheets that were set on her planning for that night. She was hyper-focused on her work until she heard a known voice behind her calling her name. "Nicole?" She turned around whilst trying not to jump out of surprise and saw it was her boss, Mr. Yoshida. The cloud humanoid wore his usual black suit as on any other day, but Nicole didn't expect to see him so soon at that moment.

Nicole: Oh, good evening, sir. What can I do for you?

Yoshida: Good evening, Nicole. I approached because I'd like to introduce you to someone who will be cooperating with you to take further care of the accountancy work we have to catch up on. And since you're one of our best employees, I thought you'd be the perfect fit to work with him, since he shows similar talents to yours for the job.

Nicole: I appreciate the compliment, sir. Who will I be working with?

Yoshida: Brandon Scotths. He's quite new, but he's settling in quickly.

Mr. Yoshida stepped aside as an average-sized man walked towards them. He appeared to be a humanoid with black hair and an orange-like colored skin, uncannily building a resemblance to the guard from Elmore Shopping, whom Nicole had attacked... Some

main differences in their looks were the fact that Brandon only had a thin moustache and not a goatee, and he wore a tight, black suit with a blue tie. His figure was slim, and he was only slightly taller than Nicole. He also had rather pointy and long ears and clawed nails that made him look a bit like a rascal. Nicole's expression turned to shock for a moment as she realized it was the new employee whom she encountered yesterday and didn't give her a good impression whatsoever.

Brandon: Why so surprised, Watterson? You thought no one else could have similar talents to yours?

Nicole groaned in annoyance, but still tried to force a smile on her face. She rested her head on her paw and sighed. She didn't really want to interact with him again after their first encounter yesterday.

Nicole: Nice to meet you again, Brandon...

Brandon: I prefer 'Mr. Scotths', Watterson.

Nicole: Alright. Scotths.

Nicole was still smiling at this point, the fakest smile she ever had. But it seemed like Yoshida didn't notice, or he didn't care; either way was fine for her.

Nicole: So, when will we start collaborating?

Yoshida: You both will receive more information about your cooperation later. Right now, we must all be catching up with the spreadsheets that were missing.

Brandon put his hands on his hips and tilted his head a slight bit as he put on a nice face that seemed rather off-putting to Nicole.

Brandon: Good sir, I know I am in charge of delivering these sheets as well, but would it be okay if some of my work gets taken over by my fellow talented coworker here? I'm still new and need time to get used to things, you know?

Yoshida: But of course, I completely understand. I'm sure Nicole

wouldn't mind, right?

Nicole's eyes narrowed, and she raised a brow.

Nicole: But sir, I'm not sure if that's a manageable deadline for me if I get even more sheets on my to-do list, especially since they have to be finished in the morning. Besides, I'm only eating my dinner right now.

Yoshida: You've been on the work floor here for years, Nicole. You're obligated to jump in whenever it's necessary, unless you don't want to prove you're deserving of the title of employee of the month?

Nicole: But that isn't a realistic deadline, and as an employee, I'm telling you that from my experience, with all due respect.

Yoshida: If you start working right now, it doesn't have to be unrealistic. Besides, you aren't allowed to take a food break before your shift, Nicole. You, of all employees, should know that.

Nicole: But I wasn't able to have dinner before I left, I-

Yoshida rudely interrupted her as his expression revealed how little patience he had left.

Yoshida: Nicole, the spreadsheets. I need them as soon as possible.

He didn't even give her the time to respond and took away Nicole's sandwiches, which she was unable to finish, throwing them away in the trash before he exited the lunchroom. He had always been a man of precise schedules and didn't realize Nicole wasn't telling an excuse. He never really appreciated her hard work overall and didn't care about the well-being of any female employee at the company. Nicole held onto her head the next second, groaning and sighing as a headache spiked up.

Nicole: Could this shift get any worse?

She glanced at the canteen's counter and noticed the lunch lady was nowhere to be seen anymore, and since food wasn't allowed in the workplace outside scheduled hours, Nicole wasn't able to get

something else to eat anyway. How was she supposed to focus on an empty stomach? Annoyed, she packed up her laptop and took the elevator to the floor where her office was. She sat down at her desk and started up her computer, after taking out the paperwork from her bag. She was about to put the pile next to her keyboard, but didn't see Brandon having joined her on the same floor, and he gave her a little push as he walked by, making her drop the papers. She didn't expect any part of that at all and turned to him, giving him an angry glare. She was aware of the fact that he clearly was waiting for a response from her, and her glare didn't last long as she sighed and continued with her own business.

Brandon: Not as feisty as they all say you are, huh?

Nicole froze and straightened her back as she sat on her desk chair, giving him a stern side-eye.

Nicole: No, I am indeed not like how everyone expects me to be. Why is that so surprising to you?

Brandon: Because that doesn't match up any bit with the way you rampaged around in that supermarket, unless it's forbidden to bring that up.

Nicole went silent for a few seconds and turned on her chair to face him entirely, tilting her head. The black-haired orange humanoid clearly didn't know who she really was, since he dared to speak to her as shamelessly as he had so far he got to know her. She did know he was way younger than her, in his late twenties, so she didn't want to be too harsh if he didn't know what he was getting himself into. After all, no matter how terrible her first impression of him was, she did have to work together with him soon, and she wanted to be the bigger person.

Nicole: How... do you know about that? Purely asking because I have no memory of seeing you during or being involved in the incident.

Brandon: It's simple. Well, maybe not as simple for you as you clearly aren't smart enough to realize why I, in fact AM involved. You thought you could keep it a secret, huh? Attacking an innocent

guard... and I'm not even getting started on the property damage you caused.

Nicole: What? That guard, I-

Brandon: That security guard is my brother, idiot. Can't you notice the resemblance? He told me all about it, and you bet I'm not gonna let you get away with this! My brother is everything I have left in my life, and he could've been dead 'cause of you!

Nicole realized it all made sense now. It was obvious that Brandon felt resentment towards her for attacking a family member of his that he cared deeply about. She had a slight bit of understanding, but her mind brought up the event of the rampage without her control. It was something she would rather forget... Deeply ashamed of what she did during that time. She felt her anxiety rising quickly as she didn't expect to be reminded of everything, along with her now fearing she was going to get into even more trouble than she already was. She kept staring Brandon in the eye lifelessly as her mind drifted off, and her anxiety made her pupils constrict out of the blue. It seemed to be something Brandon had a reaction to as soon as he saw her eyes. It was as if his getting reminded of the fact that Nicole was a feline was enough for him to snap.

Brandon: Stop it with those freaky eyes of yours! It only proves further that you're a monster in disguise.

Nicole started shivering as his comments hit her deeply, and she couldn't even get a single moment to get herself together. She felt like crying, she felt like panicking. She didn't want anyone to hate her, but she already hated herself for the way she lost it at Elmore Shopping. Even if it was months ago, it felt recent. She squeezed her eyes shut and couldn't control the way her claws unsheathed as they showed themselves on her paws. It was a fight or flight response from her body as she felt backed into a corner by the confrontation. Brandon, expectedly, called this as well.

Brandon: I know you'd like to believe you're a victim in this situation, but *those* claws don't indicate the spirit of a good person!

He pointed at her paws, and she felt like she was ridiculed as well

as shamed for her feline features. She stared down at her paws that rested on her lap, her eyes catching the sharp points on her claws that reminded her of her predator nature.

Brandon: You-

Nicole: Stop it already!

Nicole covered her eyes as she couldn't stop shivering and gritted her teeth, holding back tears.

Brandon: What?

Nicole: I said stop! Can't you make me feel any worse about myself right now?! You have NO IDEA what I'm going through, and no matter how sorry I am for my attack on your brother, I am trying so hard to fix myself.

Before Brandon could even say anything else, she suddenly couldn't take it anymore and ran away to the nearest bathroom, where she looked herself in the eye in the reflection of the mirror. Breaking down, she started shedding tears and sat down on the floor. Noticing her claws were still unsheathed, she angrily bit on them in an attempt of making them dull or short but to no avail. She leaned with her back against the wall and buried her head in her knees as she sobbed.

Chapter 4 - A feral cat

Nicole's mind couldn't stop bringing up her worries and thoughts about the rampage. She recalled seeing the security guy becoming weaker in her grip as she stared him down with her glowing eyes, aging him rapidly until his body gave in. She also couldn't stop thinking about what Brandon said. He was his brother. No wonder he was acting like such a jerk and wanted nothing but for her to pay. Nicole then suddenly snapped out of her thoughts by a voice calling her name as the bathroom door swung open. She realized it was Karen from the secretary's office who called her.

Karen: Nicole? Are you okay?

Nicole didn't expect her to enter the bathroom at all, and she didn't know how long she was able to hear her cry. She quickly got onto her feet and wiped her eyes dry, desperate to still attempt hiding away that she cried at all.

Nicole: Y-yes, Karen? What can I do for you?

Karen: Just wanted to check up on you. I saw you running to the bathroom from the other side of the office, and... have you been crying?

Nicole: N-no... I mean- it's fine. Don't worry about me.

Karen: I won't pry. But I spoke to Mr. Yoshida, and he thinks it's better if you sit at a different desk for tonight, somewhere more separated from the other employees.

Nicole: Why? Because he's worried about me?

Karen: No, because he claims you're being a distraction and didn't want you to become unwelcoming to the new employee.

Nicole: Ugh, right. It's none of his business how I'm doing, but if he wants me to sit in a solitary room, I'm fine with it; I won't complain.

Karen: Just make sure to get to work immediately. He's been watching from the side and told me you had enough work to finish tonight.

Nicole: Yeah, no worries. I'll get to it as soon as I move my stuff.

Karen: I'll walk with you to your other workplace. And, if you ever need to talk, I'm here.

Nicole: I'm fine, but thanks anyway.

As soon as Karen showed Nicole the way and the blue feline set up her stuff, she got back to work. Sitting in a solitary office room wasn't too bad, besides missing out on being able to chat with coworkers here and there. It was fine for her. She took her earbuds out of her bag and put on some music to concentrate as soon as she opened her laptop again. This desk was smaller than her usual one and didn't have a computer, but she was able to work in peace. She lost herself in her workflow and music and kept going until the spreadsheets were finally finished.

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It was close to sunrise when Nicole handed her work in and packed up before clocking out. Dark bags appeared under her eyes, even though she had slept a long while before entering her shift, as her body wasn't used to working full nightshifts. She was glad about the fact that this was only a few times in a row, as the majority of her shifts were during the day. She got in the car and drove home as the sun slowly rising made the darkness of the night disappear. Once she got home, she stumbled upon Richard being awake early in the morning, surprising her with his appearance at this hour, as he normally slept in a lot. The kids were still asleep at the moment. Nicole shut the door behind her and collapsed on the couch, feeling exhausted and dizzy from hunger. Since Yoshida took away her food, it had been a while since she was able to feed herself. She felt too dizzy to even express the fact that she was surprised to see Richard at this hour, and he immediately sensed she wasn't doing okay. He sat down next to her on the couch and gently let her head rest on his chest, trying to offer as much support and comfort as possible.

Richard: Honey? Are you okay?

Nicole struggled with speaking, as she even felt nausea welling up at this point, and murmured a bit as she spoke.

Nicole: Uh... I'm just... exhausted. Even though I slept enough hours beforehand, my body isn't used to these work hours.

Richard: Even during the nightshifts you've had before this one?

Nicole: I mean, I'm fine. Those were fine... I just had a little incident occur.

Richard: Incident? What happened, dear?

Nicole: Nothing to be worried about... It was possible for it to get resolved, so it's all fine. I've been working in a separate office for most of the night, and it was quite nice, actually. I finally finished the spreadsheets that were due today, plus some... extra ones I had to take over from a coworker.

Richard: Extra? Don't tell me they've given you more work than you normally already have...

Nicole: It's fine. I can handle it. It was nice to work on a lot of things while not having to think about many things.

Richard: Did you take any breaks, though?

Nicole: Uhm... no. Oops.

Richard: That explains why you're exhausted, then, doesn't it?

Nicole: I feel so weak, Richard. I haven't been able to eat properly either.

Richard: What? You said you were gonna grab something at the office, right?

Nicole: I did, but Mr. Yoshida told me off about it and took away my dinner. Maybe it's okay, 'cause I wouldn't have been able to finish as much work probably if I took the time to eat.

Richard: Nicole, that's ridiculous. It's most likely been more than twelve hours since you ate, and no one can function without nutrients. I understand you're not someone who needs something every two hours as I do, but this does explain why you feel weak.

Nicole: Right. You're right, dear. I am suffering the consequences of it, yes. But I had no other choice. Gosh... I can't even feel angry at Yoshida for not being understanding... I'm so dizzy...

Richard: Oh, honey! Let me prepare something for you. Do you have anything in mind you'd like?

Nicole: As long as it's edible, I'm fine with it. I don't even care, pick anything, I can't think clearly.

Richard: Right, right. I'm on it. What about some baked salmon? I know for a fact you've got a taste for fish, and you deserve a good treat after working so hard.

Nicole sat up straight on the couch once Richard went to the kitchen to take a package out of the fridge. She slouched a bit in her pose as her energy was extremely low, but her body started having a reaction of its own, which she didn't see coming. Her pupils constricted, appearing more feral again, as she watched her husband take the fresh fish out of its package. He held it up in his paw, ready to drop it in the pan on the stove. Nicole had no idea what was going through her, as her blood started rushing along with her heartbeat increasing its speed and her muscles tensing up. How she appeared very reasonable a second ago, instincts she never really thought much about started playing up. Her ears lowered to the back of her head, and the fur along her spine started rising, her claws once again showed themselves, and she arched her back a bit, winding up for a jump. She then took a large leap from the couch and pounced right into Richard's direction, snatched the salmon out of his paw with her teeth, and landed on all fours next to him in the kitchen. The pink bunny expected anything but that and gasped as he quickly turned off the stove before turning around to look at his wife, who behaved like a feral feline, the way she devoured the fish like her life depended on it. It took maybe fifteen seconds before the salmon fillet disappeared entirely, and Nicole immediately snapped out of this odd behavior of hers. She regained her normal

senses and gasped upon realizing what she had been doing. She awkwardly jumped up after realizing she was crouching on all fours and wiped some grease from the fish away from her mouth. She and Richard stared each other in the eye for a moment in silence. Richard didn't know how to react. He was used to most of her feline antics, but this was a new level, and he was simply appalled. He could only find it oddly cute after thinking about it for a bit. Nicole just had a blush from embarrassment reddening her face.

Nicole: Oh my gosh- I- I know what you're gonna ask, dear. But I have no idea what that was either.

Richard: Well, if you were that hungry, I could've just given it to you raw and saved both of us the effort!

Richard started chuckling as he found it amusing now, and he playfully winked at her. Although Nicole couldn't see the humor in it, no matter whether Richard was trying to help her feel less embarrassed about it. She grimaced and looked away for a second.

Nicole: Let's... forget about this, shall we?

Richard: Oh, honey, it's fine! Don't feel embarrassed about this. Your boss shouldn't have taken away your food, and this reaction seems valid to me; it's completely normal.

Nicole: Nothing about this is normal, Richard. Please realize that. I am a collected mother who has her life together, and I'm not some sort of feral animal. Or at least, I don't wanna be seen as such. That's why I'm asking you not to tell the kids about this.

Richard: Why? We're the Wattersons, honey, nothing innocent like that is embarrassing in this household.

Nicole: Because there's no doubt the kids will be terrified or have ideas when finding out their feline mother has tendencies to go absolutely feral like this. Don't forget they're half-bloods, dear. Half cat, half bunny, basically making me the only cold-blooded predator in this family.

Richard: Cold-blooded predator? What are you talking about?

You're allowed to act on your instincts, Nicole. I don't see the problem with hiding that. You're allowed to be proud of your nature.

Nicole: Listen, I hate bringing it up, but with the way your mother has always frowned upon me being a cat who truly loved you since the beginning, I can't waste my chance of being a presentable wife. I have a reputation to maintain.

Richard: Well, I'm sorry for asking all those questions then. I don't want to argue about something as sensitive as this, because I can tell how emotional this is making you, and I respect your opinion.

Nicole: It's best to drop it, yeah. But thanks, honey. Also, thanks for the salmon, by the way.

Richard: No problem. Just... try not to be too harsh on yourself, okay? It breaks my heart knowing you're trying to be someone that might not even be the real you. I've always loved you for who you are, even though it could include a feral side to you.

Nicole: I am not trying to be someone I'm not. I've been raised with pressure on needing to be perfect and reasonable, you know this. *Una bestia salvaje* that eats raw fish on all fours is simply not what I am. Let's just drop it for real now, Richard.

Richard nodded in understanding and allowed his wife to walk past him as she went to their bedroom to change into her pajamas. Doubts about herself started rushing through her. No matter how valid Richard's wondering about certain beliefs of hers was to her, she still didn't like to talk about it. Her parents always forced her to be as 'perfect' as she could be, and the pressure they put on her throughout her time growing up didn't help a bit. She knew she had meltdowns before, with the way she screamed and scratched her property being indications of her feral tendencies, but nothing got to the level that it just did in the kitchen. Even when thinking about the supermarket incident, she was able to connect it to anger having been the reason for her snapping. But now... something else had a strong effect on her body as well. *Instincts.* She didn't even have the time to think back on her confrontation with Brandon. Those worries got replaced by even more worries about her own

body. But no matter how much she struggled with this overthinking, her being able to eventually fall asleep was fortunate. She really had an empty battery.

Chapter 5 - Rivalry

It was close to 12 in the afternoon once Nicole woke up, after barely sleeping for four hours, and had to put in a lot of effort to get herself out of bed. She groaned as her back wasn't treating her well that morning and felt all her muscles sore out of pure exhaustion and sleep deprivation. She forced herself to take steps up the stairs towards the bathroom, holding a clean uniform under her arm. She inspected herself in the mirror and saw her bloodshot eyes that made her look as if she hadn't slept in ages, even though it had been a single restless night so far. She was a woman in need of enough sleep and would crumble if she lacked it for too long. She knew this well about herself, but it wasn't always easy to get the right number of hours of rest. Rest was already something complicated for her. She rarely felt at peace, with many things she had to do every single day, along with her mind not making her feel any satisfaction with the things she'd achieve on a day. It was never enough for her. She wanted to be productive every single day and at every possible moment. She took a deep sigh before getting undressed and stepping into the shower as she turned the water on. She leaned with her paws against the wall as she felt the warm water rush over her fur and skin, trying to keep herself upright since her back wasn't aching any less. She closed her eyes and felt the desire to go back to bed and sleep more, but she knew she couldn't. She didn't want to mess with her sleep schedule even more, even though it wasn't up to her when she had nightshifts. She shook her head as she felt close to dozing off in the shower, trying to keep herself awake, and soon washed herself clean. Minutes later, she got out, dried herself off, and got into her clean uniform. She then prepared some breakfast for herself, a simple set of sliced bread with cheese and ham, as she didn't feel like putting in a lot of effort. She also prepared a cup of coffee, chugging it as soon as it cooled off a slight bit, but there wasn't enough caffeine in there to boost her energy. So, she opened one of the top cabinets in the kitchen and grabbed an energy drink can from her hidden stash, which was hidden away from her kids, as she found them too young to even consume anything of the sort. She opened it and sat at the

dining table as she occasionally sipped it. The blue feline then grabbed her phone and decided to check her feed on Elmore Plus.

She doomscrolled for a few moments, not even paying proper attention to the posts. Most of the pictures she saw were from older friends she wasn't even in contact with anymore, other parents of Elmore Jr. High students and some of her coworkers. She then stumbled upon a post from the official account of the Rainbow Factory company. It was recommended to her since she followed some coworkers, but didn't really bother to follow that account as well. She decided to have a better look and saw the post was a compilation of some of the more recent new employees at the Factory, shaking hands with Mr. Yoshida. It was a formal and inclusive gesture, but Nicole didn't really care that much for the people in the pictures. Until she reached the last slide on the post, her attention was caught by Brandon, like the others, shaking hands with her boss. She saw his profile was tagged and wanted to have a look out of curiosity. She then felt her heart rate increase when the most recent post caught her eye immediately, as she was on it! It was a heartless picture of her running away to the bathroom at the start of her mental breakdown, captioned "if the enemy burns you, you burn them harder." Embarrassed but also curious, she checked the comments. Which she regretted within the span of a few seconds when she only saw people hating on her whilst taking Brandon's side, despite them not having any context whatsoever. Most of those people weren't even employees she knew or ever talked to, nor did she believe every commenter was an employee at the Factory at all. Her brows lowered as her face morphed into a frown, as she couldn't stop reading the comments. "You really broke her LMAO," "deserved for being such a whiny attention-seeking wench!" "The world would be better off without her NGL." Nicole didn't get it. She knew she wasn't a saint in everyone's eyes, but she never expected to be hated by so many strangers, let alone on the internet. She shut off her phone for a second, taking it all in and closing her eyes while gritting her teeth. *It's fine... People on the internet are often heartless anyway...* she thought to herself and took a deep breath before turning her phone back on. The blue feline did know for sure she wasn't comfortable at all with the unsolicited picture that was taken of her, showing her mentally breaking down for the world to see. She saw that Brandon had the direct messaging

option enabled on his profile, and she shot him a quick notice, demanding that he take down the post and asking if she would be able to talk it through with him to reach a new understanding. It took barely five minutes for him to respond; that and his countless posts made Nicole think he was definitely online a lot. He sent a threatening response, saying her time ran out and that she needed to properly pay for her actions. "Prepare for your last shift tonight, Watterson," he sent before shamelessly blocking Nicole's account and leaving her unable to respond. *He's getting me fired?!* she restlessly thought. She stared blankly at her coffee cup for a while before getting up to put it away in the kitchen. The awful feeling gnawed at her insides as nothing about this sat well with her. In need of distraction, she grabbed the grocery list from the fridge and decided to do some shopping.

Throughout her drive to the store, she couldn't stop worrying as the gnawing feeling wouldn't quit. It was a bit hard to focus on the traffic around her, but she managed to arrive at Elmore Shopping safely. Elmore Shopping... How could she forget? The very place where the incident took place. She silently pushed her shopping cart through the aisle and grabbed the necessities on the list, like any other day. Her heartbeat sped up the closer she got to the back of the store, near the electrical regulating box she had punched before her rampage unfolded. She shook her head briefly and tried to let go of it, no matter how difficult that was for her. She also saw the Hexagon Lady talking to the security guy she had attacked, Brandon's brother. As she walked past, she tried to avoid eye contact with either of them. Even though her restraining order on the store expired not so long ago, she still couldn't bear looking them in the eye. Taking deep breaths as she kept walking, she just felt the two staring at her. At the checkout, she paid for her groceries and looked behind her shoulder one last time, taking a deep breath, and then walked out of the store. After putting the bags in the trunk, she briefly checked her phone before starting the car's engine. A soft smile appeared on her snout as she read the messages from her kids who were debating about what was for dinner in their family group chat, them being their usual selves. She then saw Richard had sent her a private message, asking if everything was fine and mentioning he hoped she was able to rest well. She replied with a reassuring message to tell him all was okay.

But in fact it wasn't, but she didn't want to admit that to him. Not right now. She didn't want to pester him with her hysterical worrying all the time and hoped her stress about this situation would fade soon. For now, it was most important for her to just keep going with her life, and if she pretended nothing was wrong, she would live up to it. That's what she thought, at least.

It was past 5 PM when the Wattersons were having dinner together again, Nicole including herself this time, as she didn't want to take any chances this night and decided to eat before leaving for work. The rest of the day was filled with household tasks for her, which she completed before dinner. She barely said a word while the five were eating their food. Instead, she stared at her plate with mashed potatoes, broccoli, and ground beef in silence. Even though her worrying caused a knot to form in her stomach, she still managed to eat enough to stay energized. She still felt a bit sleep-deprived, but drank a second energy drink just to be safe. The blue feline lost track of time a bit as soon as the family finished their meal, and she gasped when looking at the clock. She ran to the bedroom to collect her bag and swung it on her shoulder before leaving in a rush, running a bit late for her shift, to her unfortunate. Little did she know it was only the start of an unlucky set of events. Richard's eyes followed her figure running out the door to the car, and he rested his gaze on the clock in the living room when his wife closed the front door behind her. His face expressed nothing but worry, but he didn't want to show too much of it to the kids.

Nicole didn't manage to catch up on her being late and rushed into the Rainbow Factory with pure embarrassment. Even if it could've been more than half an hour after her clock-in time, she was a woman who felt like everyone always needed to be able to count on her. She despised letting others down, regardless of whether they had authority or not. She settled in the separate office after clocking in and started up her laptop, right before Mr. Yoshida entered through the door to check up on her.

Yoshida: Good evening, Nicole.

Nicole: G-good evening! I-

Yoshida: You're late. Care to explain?

Nicole: Traffic, you know it, heh.

Yoshida: Look, I would expect such an excuse from an intern or a new employee, but not from you. What's going on with you, Nicole? First, you avoid the rule of not eating outside of scheduled hours, then you get into a feud with the new guy, and now you run late for your shift?

Nicole felt like a block of concrete weighed on her shoulders, and her ears lowered at his remarks.

Nicole: Brandon? He literally pestered me into breaking down yesterday, sir. I wish I didn't have to bring it up, but I can assure you all I wanted was to do my work in peace.

Yoshida: We got you a separate office for now for a reason. And I doubt it was him 'pestering' you from what I've heard.

Nicole: What do you mean? He insulted me and gave me invalid criticism about things I cannot change! How is that different from pestering?

Yoshida: I would like to disagree. He's a new employee, and it's clear to me you're trying to put him in a place where he can't reach higher than you. Your fixation on wanting to be employee of the month has proven to me you wouldn't hesitate to put others down to raise yourself up for that title, Nicole.

Nicole: What?

Yoshida: Be as surprised as you're trying to pretend to be, but I see through you. Brandon has a lot of great skill sets, ideal for this company, and exactly what we're in need of during our time of setbacks. But even if that's the case, we wouldn't hesitate to replace you with him entirely if you can't sympathize with him. So, I'd suggest making up with him as soon as possible.

Nicole: Mr. Yoshida, with all my due respect, how does this seem fair to you? It seems Brandon has been talking to you about all this directly, but don't you want to hear my side of the story as well?

Yoshida: No need. Unless you're able to talk about the impactful

secret you've been keeping from the work environment for the past few months? Brandon seems to know something about you that I don't.

Nicole: He's... told you?

Yoshida: Not yet, but if you think your side of the story is worth listening to, I would like an elaboration first.

Nicole: I'm... not sure if I can, sir.

Yoshida: And why not?

Nicole: I just... need you to trust me on this one. It's nothing that can directly impact my performance at work or damage the company even in the slightest.

Yoshida: Right... Brandon did say it had to do with the two of you having some sort of disagreement about an event outside of work. If that's true, you need to go easier on him as a person and prove you're wise enough to show empathy to someone as young as he is.

Nicole: I- Okay... I don't think it's any use for me to start an argument about this, so I won't say anything else. Because it's clear to me you don't trust me at all, sir.

Yoshida: Oh, come on, Nicole. You really are turning into a rebel out of the blue. I don't mean this as a threat, but I am concerned with your changing behavior, and I don't think this version of you would be fit for this company.

Nicole: You really don't think so? What about all the words of encouragement I received when I proved to be one of the runners-up of this entire Factory?

Yoshida: Being a runner-up still means you need to follow the company's rules and regulations. As your boss, I demand you stop this charade and do what you need to do.

Nicole: Fine...

The cloud humanoid frowned as he gave her a dismissive nod and

walked away. The blue feline couldn't take what he told her. She couldn't risk losing her job over something stupid and small like this?! She clenched her paws into fists and felt the urge to punch anything in her way, but collected herself by taking deep breaths. She felt like she was being treated unfairly, but this wasn't the first time she felt this way at her job. But there wasn't much to do about it; her options were very limited, and being unemployed would ruin her. Brandon though... She wasn't planning on taking any of his insults and manipulation tactics any longer, and she angrily walked to the main office. The blue feline stumbled upon the orange humanoid standing next to the coffee machine as he helped himself. It was as if he smelled her approaching from behind him, as he turned around after noticing her immediately and put himself in a sassy pose, leaning against the machine.

Brandon: Oh, hi, Watterson. You've finally gotten the message, haven't you?

Nicole: Scotths! What the *fuck* are you doing?!

Brandon: Yikes, profanity. That's not a pretty word to use, Watterson.

Nicole: As if you care in the slightest.

Brandon: I do care very much, actually. Especially about the fact that this is your last shift. I warned you.

Nicole: What do you mean by 'warned' me? You haven't even given me any chance to talk this out!

Brandon: No need. I already know you'd only be deflecting the arguments about your wrongdoings, and this entire town has gone way too easy on you.

Nicole: I can't have you throwing dirt on my name like this. Nor can I afford to lose my job as I have an entire family to look after!

Brandon: Shouldn't have become a mother then, amiright? You've only got yourself to blame, cat.

Nicole's fur on her neck started to rise as fuel was added to the fire

bit by bit.

Nicole: My life choices are none of your concern, and you don't have the right to insult me for things I can't control or weren't my fault.

Brandon: I beg to differ. You are fully responsible for your actions, regardless of whatever illness you have. I can't stand people getting away with actual crimes and violations by just using their ailments as an excuse.

Nicole: How dare you assume I'm like that? Why does it matter if I'm ill or not... Are you forgetting about the actual restraining order I've gotten on Elmore Shopping for a couple of months, along with every store in its radius rejecting my visits, as well as people who witnessed the incident avoiding me at all costs?

Brandon: Good. Not good enough, though.

Nicole: Forget it... Why am I even telling you this? You have no business in my life whatsoever, and you don't know what I've actually gone through.

Brandon: You don't know what I've gone through either! Just because you suffer from something doesn't mean you can go out attacking innocent people and be the cause of them dying, even! You need psychiatric help, genuinely.

Nicole: Oh, shut up already.

Brandon: Got nothing to say to that, huh?

Nicole: What do you want from me, Scotths...

Brandon: I want you gone from this company. I want you to suffer as an actual criminal suffers by doing their time in jail. They let you go with a slap on the wrist, and you can't seem to see that you're an actual threat to this society.

Nicole: You can't just sabotage to get me fired. What would come out of it for you, anyway, to have me be in a ditch and unemployed? Revenge? Is that how low you want to steep?

Brandon: I don't care. Just because you're in your forties and made the grave mistake of becoming a mother doesn't mean I'm obligated to listen to your useless yapping. And also, I'm not 'attempting' to get you fired. I'm achieving it, as I'm gonna speak to Mr. Yoshida instantly.

Nicole: Oh no, you're not!

Brandon: And what's gonna stop me? Lemme guess, you're either gonna burst into crocodile tears and attempt to manipulate me, or you're just gonna go all monster-mode on me like in the supermarket.

Nicole: You're making a grave mistake, Brandon. You have no idea who you're dealing with, and by far, I've actually taken most of your *bullshit*. My patience has run dry.

Brandon: Oh, so edgy... Wouldn't want to mess with the angry hairball of disgrace, would I?

Nicole: Call me 'edgy' all you want, but you're acting immature enough on your part, oh my lord. You're insufferable.

Brandon: Say it. You want me dead, don't you? Just admit it already. In front of me is nothing but a bloodthirsty killer waiting for its moment to strike me down. We have known each other for less than a week, but here you are. Wanting me dead.

Nicole: Out of all the stupid things you've spat, by far, that might be one of the dumbest sets of sentences I've heard leaving your dirty mouth so far. You can't get me to kill you, bastard, I'm not as unreasonable as that. You like to believe I am, but you have no clue who I am.

Brandon: I know you're a brute. Why are you surprised I would assume such a thing about you? You're NOTHING but a sick, psychotic monster.

Those last words echoed inside Nicole's mind as she was about to snap. She clenched her paws into fists and bared her teeth, after automatically grabbing onto Brandon's arm with one of her paws.

He tried to move it away from her grip, but she held it tightly and narrowed her eyes as her pupils constricted.

Nicole: Stop talking. That was one sentence too much, young man. Just get out of my sight. Right now.

Brandon: Oh no, did I push you too far...?

Nicole: You've pushed me over, alright.

Brandon: Over what?

The feline's claws unsheathed as she tightened her grip on his arm further, letting him shriek out of pain as he clearly didn't steer clear of her gruesome power and strength. She started chuckling unsettlingly.

Nicole: My goddamn LIMIT!

Chapter 6 - Provoked

Brandon realized too late that he made a mistake by ticking off the enraged blue feline, but at the same time, it was exactly what he wanted to get out of her. The way her eyes changed color and turned glowing orange with yellow pupils terrified him greatly, and no matter how badly he wanted to show what he believed was the real her to everyone around, his first instinct was to run away when he saw that she changed extremely quickly. He managed to escape from her grip as soon as a headache spiked up inside her skull and she needed a moment to hold her head tightly, as Brandon took off and ran down the stairs. The blue feline yelped and groaned in pain for a moment as she hadn't felt this agony for a long time, felt like her skull was burning, and she lost balance before she was even able to get a grip on her vision again, which blurred a slight bit. Her body hit the wall as she became a tad disoriented, and she had to forcibly help herself to stand up straight by keeping her paws pressed on the bricks. In a rush, she then took her chance to give in to chasing after Brandon as soon as she collected herself the next second. She encountered him on the lowest floor, the one of the parking lot, helplessly trying to force the door open as he heard her rushing towards him down the stairs. Although to no avail, as the door appeared to be locked, and he turned around to face the enraged feline that was barely recognizable behavior-wise. She narrowed her eyes as her blurred vision made it hard to decipher how far away Brandon was, but she was still able to tell that it was him in front of her. She shook her head a few times as her eye twitched for a moment and visibly fought against herself, attempting to snap herself out of this uncontrolled behavior just now.

Brandon: Why... why are you like this...? Can't you see this is the reason why you shouldn't have a job or be out in the open like this? I simply wanted to make my point clear, that the smallest nitpicking or criticism already ticks you off like this!

Nicole heard his words clearly, but didn't know how to respond.

Her entire mind was a heavy fog, and even if she usually would've been able to try to talk things through, the current ongoing pain and anger kept her away from that. She stopped approaching him, as she was taking some slow steps closer earlier, and now lowered her head as she stared at the floor, softly growling and panting as her energy started to drain more quickly.

Brandon: Do you hear me? Or did you lose your ability to speak as well as to control yourself?!

Nicole panted a few more times before raising her head and staring him in the eye with her glowing yellow pupils. She opened her mouth a slight bit and started trembling, forcing herself to form words despite it being extremely difficult right now.

Nicole: You're only trying... to provoke me, aren't you...

Brandon: I am trying to make you realize you're thinking about your situation in the wrong way! Actions have consequences, and you need to be held accountable, as you clearly see yourself as a victim here!

Nicole: I... don't believe you are. For several months on end, I've been working on improving myself, and since the supermarket incident, nothing else has happened... And you're just... trying to get this ugly side of mine out again to convince others you're in the right...

Brandon: I don't care if nothing has happened after that... I do not see proper improvement from you, judging by the way you're standing in front of me with literal drool dripping from your mouth like a beast. I don't care if you're in a lot of pain, but you CLEARLY are unable to be a properly functional person.

Nicole's eyes widened as she touched her chin with her paw, realizing she indeed was drooling a bit, and she wiped it away in embarrassment. Her brows lowered again as the pain in her skull didn't fade yet, but at least her vision was clearing up a bit, and she was able to tell what expressions Brandon showed on his face. It was at this point that her mind was slightly clear enough for her to realize she started feeling bad for him and realized she was in the

wrong. She knew she had often had the tendency before to jump into a very defensive demeanor whenever she got criticized or when she was faced with consequences of her actions that were out of her control for the majority of them. She swallowed her saliva and sighed in defeat with her eyes closed, lowering her paw from her face again.

Nicole: I... I'm sorry. I should've apologized from the get-go, I just realized. It was on me for jumping into such a defensive attitude, and my responsibility for what happened... Though... I don't know what else I can do anymore to fix this.

Nicole paused for a moment and moved her eyes from the floor up to Brandon's face, who positioned himself in a less fight-or-flight type of way once he heard her words. He crossed his arms and waited for her to continue.

Nicole: I'm sorry for having hurt your brother, I really am... But what can I do for you to do my part and help you find peace with the situation?

She breathed heavily and struggled a bit with it as her current state still drained a lot of energy from her, yet she tried her very best to stay as collected as possible to converse. Brandon frowned slightly, deep down wishing he was able to accept her apology and answer her, but his own mind conflicted heavily with itself, and he reverted to his criticism.

Brandon: I don't know, Watterson. I might have come off as a bit of a dick the past shifts, but I felt frustrated with how you didn't take the hints, and now I am unsure if I can still feel closure with your apology... it being late and all. It doesn't really feel like you're being genuine, or if you just wanna throw sand on it and move on.

Nicole: Why didn't you tell me straight away then, from the very first minute you had seen me at the office? I am approachable and communicative when there's a right start to the conversation, but it felt like you pushed me into a corner immediately, and I had trouble getting a grip on realizing it all because I didn't even know what was wrong at first. You don't have to accept my apology if you feel like I'm too late with it now, or if you just don't give a shit, it's

all fine. But at least... help me out and tell me what I can do to have us move on properly.

Brandon: That's the problem, you just want to move on, but some things you have to really realize and sit down for, especially when you've committed an action that has severely hurt another individual, y'know? I didn't feel like putting the topic right on the table at first, as I assumed you would've recognized my appearance somehow, but also just... some personal bias I have burned into me.

Nicole: Personal bias?

Brandon: I bet you didn't know this, but yeah... Just... can't handle the felines very well personally.

Nicole: What? Why? What do you mean by that?

The blue cat's ears, which were just folded back, raised to the top of her head as they perked up, and her whiskers itched a slight bit.

Brandon: My father was murdered by one in front of my very eyes when I was young...

Nicole's eyes widened, and her pupils turned black, along with her sclerae turning white, back to normal again, as she stared in disbelief and shock at the slim humanoid. She didn't know how to react, yet she felt a slight bit of understanding, but also none at all, as this had nothing to do with her.

Nicole: Oh gosh, that's terrible- I'm so sorry that has happened to you... I assume you were very close to him?

Brandon didn't expect Nicole to soften up even more like this just now, and he felt an odd sense of disgust towards it inside of him, but he tried to mask it.

Brandon: I was. Losing him hasn't been easy on me for the majority of my life now, even to this day. I'm twenty-eight, and it still hurts as much as the day it happened.

Nicole felt even worse for him now at this point, forgetting entirely about how he had verbally insulted and harassed her the days

before.

Nicole: Gosh... I'm- I'm so sorry, once again. I don't know what it's like to lose a very close family member like that, but I understand the grieving process must be difficult. Did the perpetrator at least get justified in a way that you and your family were able to get more closure?

Brandon: Justified? Nah, they don't do court cases for feral tigers, I think.

Nicole's brow raised, and she tilted her head in confusion for a few seconds until she realized.

Nicole: Wait... feral tigers? Was your father killed by a feral tiger? Not a citizen?

Brandon: No. He worked as a zookeeper for several years, one of the best around, and I witnessed him getting mauled by a provoked tiger in the enclosure he was doing a show at, all when I was seven. Gosh, I've struggled with facing any feline ever since.

Nicole frowned as she now didn't really expect the story to be this different than what she assumed before. She still felt bad for his loss, but the context caught her in a tangle.

Nicole: Hey, but... You do realize that we cats, the ones that walk upright and live just like you are, aren't the same as... feral animals, right? It's two worlds apart.

Brandon: Does that even matter? I don't really see the difference; you having attacked my brother in the savage way you did triggered something in me. You felines are all the same.

The cat's tail swayed a few times in distress as his comment felt rather offensive and harsh to her. She knew she had to learn how to take criticism on her actions and behaviors, but when it came to her background or... actual species... It was very sensitive to her, with no excuses. She was still rather unstable, and it angered her once again, as a soft, brief growl escaped her mouth when she curled up the corner of her muzzle.

Nicole: You really think so? We're just... the same? That's how you see my species, that's how you see... me?!

Brandon: Well, jeez, I'm sorry if I hit a nerve there!

The humanoid put his hands into his sides, and both he and the cat felt like their previous brief calm interchange wasn't lasting any longer. Nicole couldn't help but know she felt extremely offended and couldn't stay away from it.

Nicole: Look, buddy, I completely understand this whole situation. My being involved was very bad timing and just not the right addition to your own trauma from losing your father during your childhood. But I'm not gonna stand by the weirdly distorted views on species and life you have here. Elmore is an inclusive place, regardless of identity, species, or background... and I am willing to give you my understanding and best wishes when it comes to what you've been through, but I'm not a fan of racism.

Brandon: I'm not racist, you freak. I have my personal right through my own experiences to avoid certain reminders or people... whatever.

Nicole: But you can't... hold on forever, Brandon. You need to find your closure somehow. I can't let go of this situation if you can't either, and I really just don't want this all to get worse for both of us. And once again, I am not a fucking feral tiger.

Brandon: Just stop. You don't understand 'cause you've never had a rough day in your life. You think you're such a know-it-all because of your age and position as a mother, but I don't care. I'm going my own way with this, preferably without being guided and babied by a woman who's about a decade older than me.

Nicole: What?! Earlier, you were telling me I have to learn how to take criticism better, and here you are unable to do the same! I can't help you if you don't want me to help! What else could you possibly want from me?! What do you want ME to do so you can stop tormenting me!

Brandon: I've heard enough, Nicole. Just quit the yapping already,

because we clearly can't agree, and this conversation isn't going anywhere.

Nicole: You're giving up... I can tell you are. You just don't wanna hear how hypocritical and self-victimizing you are... I see how it is now.

Brandon: Shut up! Shut the fuck up! My lord, you don't know when to shut your mouth, do you?!

Nicole went silent as she could tell Brandon got very close to his breaking point, as his state of mind and emotional responses had been all over the place as much as hers the past few minutes during their conversation. Her tail hung completely still now as she put her right paw on her left shoulder and turned her head away a bit, taking slow and deep breaths when she felt her headache finally fading away. Her stomach tied into a knot as she didn't know what to do anymore. He didn't want her apology, she was too late in his eyes, and she felt conflicted with how to even feel about him overall anymore. Her pity and understanding quickly got submerged by frustration, and her feeling affronted.

Brandon: Gosh, you have to cut those claws of yours; my arm still hurts like hell. Psycho behavior to grab me like that.

He held onto the arm that Nicole had clenched before and shook his head. It was visible that he started losing his train of thought in this split second.

Brandon: I told you a huge part of my personal backstory, by the way, that barely anyone knows. Purely to talk some goddamn sense into you, which clearly didn't help. The worst type of trauma I went through, and all you had to say was a stupid lecture about letting shit go, when you clearly haven't experienced the same before. And just caring about your little feelings being hurt over a mild generalization.

Nicole: You have no IDEA what I've been through, young man. Very, very bold of you to assume that. I briefly mentioned it before, but I simply wasn't in the right headspace to really talk about it properly, and those random things I mentioned that were

consequential to the supermarket incident were insignificant as hell.

Brandon: Really? What could you, a creature like you, possibly have gone through?

Nicole: None of your business. I'm just trying to correct you on your assumptions here, but I don't want pity. I don't need it, and I don't expect it.

Brandon: Ah man, you're getting more annoying the more I talk to you, you know that?

Nicole: Well, just go then. Go back upstairs, I don't care. I'm not stopping you from leaving.

Brandon: Argh, I can't take your sassy attitude anymore, stupid mouser. I thought I also told you to shut up...

Nicole: Oh, go kick rocks, asshole.

It was at that exact moment that Nicole noticed for the first time how Brandon's eyes seemed bewildered and out of touch with his surroundings properly now. He had already been losing his mind throughout the developments of their conversation, but it now became more prominent as he suddenly kicked the locked door, creating an unexpected, harsh sound that startled Nicole greatly. She jumped a slight bit, and the fur on her back started rising quickly. She decided to stay quiet for real now and took a step back, feeling threatened now as her claws automatically unsheathed on her paws.

Brandon: Where are you going?! You said kick rocks? I can kick anything if I have to! You're not as powerful and wise as you might think you are, Nicole! Someone has to finally put you in your place, I'm afraid...

Nicole's pupils constricted as she started feeling more stressed as well, and she whispered.

Nicole: What...the... fuck?

It was then that Brandon frantically ripped the fire extinguisher

from the wall next to the doorpost and kicked Nicole in her chest hard enough for her to gasp and reach for air as she got pushed back a few steps and fell over on her back. He brought out his further unstable behavior when he sprayed the chemical contents from the extinguisher in her face while pushing down her chest with his foot. Her feline reflexes were strong enough for her to turn her head away and squeeze her eyes shut fast enough to avoid it from getting into her retinas. She felt urges to gasp for air, but didn't want to inhale any of it, nor did she want to choke. Something protective and feral within her got a hold of her in that same moment when she suddenly was able to free herself, trying to reach for his collar to throw him off her. But as she was unable to open her eyes yet and felt too disoriented, her aim was terrible, and her clawed paw hit his left eye socket instead, slashing the sharp keratin right through his eyeball as blood dramatically sprayed out and splattered on the floor under them. Brandon dropped the fire extinguisher immediately and desperately screamed his lungs out in agony as he covered his left eye with his hands, starting to tear up from the worst physical pain he had ever felt in his life. His eye was covered in blood as the slashes already hurt enough, yet the red essence pouring out stung even more. He felt overcome by such disbelief and rage to the point of not allowing Nicole to get away, when she felt sheer shock and guilt at the sight of her damage. She wanted to rush upstairs to get the first aid kit and ask for help, but Brandon was too out of control for him to even think of that, as he assumed she purely had bad intentions even more now. He screamed one more time, in pure anger now, as he picked up the fire extinguisher from the floor with one of his hands, keeping the other on his bleeding eye, and hit Nicole on her head hard enough for her to collapse forward and pass out instantly. Her vision went dark, her hearing silent, and her senses left her as she didn't have any further thoughts once her system blacked out.

Chapter 7 - Preliminary aching

Nicole groaned audibly when a stinging sensation in her back, near her right shoulder blade, woke her up from what seemed to be a period of having passed out asleep. She vaguely remembered the deafening ringing in her ears from the impact of getting hit with the fire extinguisher and the short-lived aching in her head before she blacked out entirely. She felt the unusual sensation of the couch cushions under her as she realized she had been tucked in at home, and, to her unfortunate, the couch remained a less comfortable place to sleep on for her sensitive back. Her muscles around her spine ached, and she felt the need to get up for a moment, aiming to lie back down in bed as the darkness in the room suggested it was still late at night. It had been a few hours since she was apparently taken home from her nightshift, but she could barely remember how everything after she had been hit and passed out went down. The feline struggled with lifting herself from her lying down position and slowly got herself upright, pushing the flannel blanket off her and taking a few deep breaths before reaching for her phone that lay on the living room table in front of her. She squinted her eyes at the sudden bright, cold light from her screen as she turned it on and immediately lowered the brightness. As soon as her eyes adjusted a bit, she noticed it was shortly after four in the morning, and her ears flattened, both disappointed at the hour itself yet glad the night wasn't over yet, and she hoped she'd be able to get a few more hours of better rest in bed. She quickly tilted her head a bit to both sides to crack her neck loose that had gotten stiff from lying on the couch, and she stretched herself out by arching her back slightly backward and raising her arms high. A tiny crack in her lower back made her wince a slight bit when she realized her body felt weak and beat up despite the time she slept after having been unconscious for a while. She did wake up after her hit for a moment before falling back asleep a few hours ago, but simply couldn't remember it.

She felt uneasy when some of her memories caught up to her, and she remembered what happened. Brandon absolutely had lost his

mind in their argument and ended up smashing her skull in with the fire extinguisher he ripped from the wall, with which he earlier tried to suffocate her by spraying the chemicals into her face. Her eyes then darted to her own left paw, which she remembered having used in defense, but accidentally hurt him when she tried to throw him off her as she gasped for air. She flexed her fingers and unsheathed the claws on them, inspecting the remaining dried clots of blood that were still left on them. It was like an odd configuration to her that it had actually happened. That she actually, most likely, permanently blinded the humanoid in his left eye. The rationalist in her felt sorry and guilty for this act of violence, which she so fought against. But her emotional side knew he shouldn't have pushed her buttons, and without her defense, despite its violent nature, she could've choked to her death or inhaled a dangerous amount of chemical substance. She sighed deeply and retracted the claws on her left paw again, before slowly getting up from the couch and heading to the kitchen for a sip of water, as she felt her throat being dry as a desert once her grogginess lessened. Her hair was awfully tangled, and she felt sweaty and gross, wishing it wasn't an improper hour to take a shower at the moment. She didn't want to wake her sleeping family up with the running water and whatnot, so she decided to suck it up and wait for when she'd wake up in the morning. At least that's what she hoped, as she wasn't sure if she would have enough energy to get up on time at this point. It was Thursday, 4 AM, so her weekend was two shifts away still. She felt utterly exhausted and knew her night shifts were unfit for her energy levels, but she desperately needed to catch up on money every once in a while to even be able to afford enough to maintain her family. She got paid extra during night shifts, but simply, physically, wasn't able to do just night shifts all the time. Her health would decline even more under such hours if they were persistent and she preferred being awake around the same time as the majority of the world, especially her family, of course.

She shook her head to get out of her thoughts and went back to focusing on what she was originally doing, grabbing a glass of water. She watched the water run from the faucet as she held the glass under it and waited a few seconds for it to be filled, her mind once again wandering off to her shift's earlier events. She frowned a

slight bit after stopping the water and stared out of the window with an empty glare. *How the hell did I lose my mind the way I did back at that staircase...?* She just couldn't understand it, the more she started thinking about it. The last time she felt as uncontrolled as she felt in that short moment was in fact the supermarket rampage. The last thing she ever expected was for it to potentially resurface or show itself at all. What could be going on? Was it the stress she had been experiencing over the past weeks? Lack of proper rest? Pain flare-ups? She just couldn't figure it out or even properly theorize, but she knew for sure she felt worried by it. What a strange phenomenon it was when she had felt an instinctual force driving her that other morning when she came home, and Richard wanted to prepare some food for her. She brushed it off to him as something she wanted to forget, but she couldn't deny the fact that she had been thinking about that still. Strange signals and occurrences had been collecting themselves in such a short timespan this week so far, and she didn't even know where to begin if she even wanted to figure out the mystery behind it. She felt so tired... All she wanted was to go to bed right now, but her head couldn't stop getting stuck in spirals and tangents of thoughts that kept her restless and awake. She took sips from her water and sat down at the kitchen counter for a moment, leaning with her arms on it after setting the glass next to her and holding onto her head. The impact from getting hit didn't hurt as much anymore, but a different type of pain had made itself present in the past few minutes, she noticed. It felt... strange. Like a headache, but not enough to make her feel hindered by it, more like an annoying, slightly stinging sensation that synced with her heartbeat. It was as if she could feel her veins throb on top of her skull somehow. Despite the pain being mild, she couldn't help but feel put off by how strange the sensation was. The more she focused on not being willing to worry much about it, the more, in fact, she started to worry.

It was at the very moment she finished her glass of water when stranger phenomena began to concern her. An unexpected, harsh twitch in her right wrist made her arm jolt a slight bit, and as she was holding the glass with that paw, it fell and shattered once it hit the floor. She gasped at the accidental and uncontrolled motion and wanted to get up quickly to clean the shards. But as soon as her feet

hit the floor, getting off the stool, her spine felt like it caved in on itself, and her muscles weakened heavily. She had no choice but to catch her body with her paws as it tumbled over, and she stayed on her knees for a few seconds when it became harder to recollect herself. She let out a soft groan when her headache started to increase as well, and now she actually felt the pain hindering her ability to think straight. After squeezing her eyes shut for a moment, she opened them again and tried to get a grip on her surroundings, starting to take shorter breaths when she noticed her vision blurred. She felt drowned by a wave of confusion and fear as her bodily sensations and aches felt like nothing she had ever experienced before. It started feeling as if her muscles and skin set themselves on fire as the burning pain began to rapidly increase without warning. She was forced to squeeze her eyes shut again once the sharp agony became too much, quick enough, and she started panting once her short breaths intensified. Her heartbeat started absolutely racing, and it felt like an immense amount of pressure was weighing on her skull as the pain couldn't escape, staying trapped inside her ignited brain. Even if her body started feeling like it was reaching its overdrive on trying to carry the pain, it didn't take long until newfound, unnatural changes of appearance started happening.

All of her claws on her paws began to unsheathe, and even though she had an innate deformity of the claws on her feet being unable to retract, they still felt like they were more tensed up than normal. It felt unnatural how suddenly the very same sets of claws all started to poke out more than usual, elongating slightly at that as they all appeared, turning larger than her claws naturally were. She clenched her paws uncontrollably, and the larger claws turned out to be dense and sharp enough to cause serious damage to the tile kitchen floor below her, a horrible, brief scratching sound emerging from the keratin that she dug into the ceramic. The muscles in her limbs and back started to tense up more as she felt the fibers extending, as they appeared to be growing slightly in size, followed by the dreadful, sharp agony of her bones extending a bit. Awful cracking noise emitted from her structure as her joints suffered under the sudden changes and pressure, her bones seeming to bend and twist in ways she couldn't be any more concerned about. She felt her body contorting and shifting in the most discomforting

ways, where the tissue and bone tried to reposition and reshape themselves, but were unable to figure out how exactly. She never felt this way before, and it was nothing compared to anything that ever happened to her during past outbursts of anger. The main issue was that she now didn't even feel as angry for it to make at least a little more sense to her. She felt afraid, confused, and exhausted at that, and now got close to the edge of panicking when these bodily changes were unknown to her. She couldn't understand what was happening or why, but her continuously throbbing head made it impossible to even keep a thought for longer than two seconds.

She then lost her balance entirely, even on her hands and paws, and flopped down onto her side, her still trembling system making it hard to navigate when she tried to open her eyes for a moment, wanting to see what was happening to her. In her short breaths, her eyes widened in terror when she saw the veins on her paws and arms slightly bulging as the blood could be seen being pumped through them. Her jaw slowly opened a slight bit in a gasp, and she softly uttered in her misery.

Nicole: Oh gosh- O-oh my, w-what the actual fuck is this?

Her larger claws caught her off guard as well, but her attention soon enough got taken by her mouth, which added another new layer of pain to the set of changes, and she couldn't even utter any more words. She leaned forward, her head lifelessly dangling in the midst of her trembling, and once again forced her eyes shut once she felt one of the sharpest pains she had ever experienced at this point. Her teeth began to grow further out of her gums as they slightly increased in size, in the most draining, slow way. Even though her entire body appeared to become a bit larger than usual with the deforming changes, it didn't take long for her gums to start bleeding from the sharp tension that her growing teeth were causing. It was a grotesque feeling comparable to slowly running a small knife across her gum tissue. She couldn't help but moan and gnash her teeth together when she started feeling desperate for the overwhelming pain to end. Some of her own blood hit her tongue, and she felt disgusted by the metallic taste enough to spit a few drops out, hitting the tiles below her face as she watched the grim scenery accompanying her horror show of a transformation, for the

very first time. She softly cried as soon as the pain in her gums seemed to fade a bit, along with the rest of her body, but she felt horrified by the small parts she had seen so far, and mainly the pain she experienced. She still felt her body aching, but it was on a lesser level that allowed her to be able to get up from the floor again, as she slowly did.

She felt scared to find a mirror, but her curiosity overpowered her as she felt the need to know what was even going on at all. And even if she wouldn't get her questions answered immediately, she still couldn't help but go see anyway. She limped a few steps away from where she was just lying in the kitchen, but quickly enough noticed her body contorted to a point where it was hard to stay upright, and she tripped a few times in her attempt to reach the living room. After a few failed attempts at standing up straight again, the pain felt like a block to her bipedal posture, and she resorted to walking on her paws as well, on all fours, when it felt less unnatural to do so by her newfound structure. She didn't understand what was going on, but also not why she'd even feel this forced into a different demeanor or behavior by her body, as soon as she sensed a lingering urge to head outside just now. She couldn't get used to the sensation of her slightly larger teeth in her mouth as she kept her jaws a bit open, and a few drops of drool managed to escape by this. She felt a bit of the drool run down her jaw, and in disgust, she wanted to lick it clean, but in doing so, she hit the ends of her fangs and incisors with her tongue and felt horrified by how much sharper they appeared to have become. Even sharper than normally? Was that even possible? She stopped in the tracks of her more feral posture and sat down with her knees up to seek balance and frantically checked her teeth with her paws, tracing the outlines of them with her fingers as gently as possible, not wanting to accidentally hurt herself. The second her jaws were open for a few seconds longer, the more drool was able to leak out, and she felt increasingly disgusted by it. Had she become some sort of feral animal in the past few minutes? Was it like her shameful fear manifesting in a nightmare come true?

During her frantic moment of trying to inspect her shifted body parts with touch from her paws, she didn't even realize yet that she ended up sitting next to the mirror in the living room on the carpet

floor, right next to the door of her and her husband's bedroom. At this point, she felt that her vision had gotten less blurry than it was a bit ago, yet it remained hard to get a proper grip on her surroundings, despite never having had any issue before with perception at night as a feline being. It was usual, but she was close enough to the mirror next to her for her to be able to catch a glimpse of her reflection in the corner. She froze in place, and her heartbeat felt as if it was speeding up even more than it already was, as if it could go even faster than its usual limit. Her pupils slowly moved to her left side as she sat facing the house's front door, and her vision panned from there to the bedroom door and ended at the mirror next to her. It was then that her heart sank immediately. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine and a bit of upwelling nausea in her stomach from the stress that hit her. She felt grossed out and scared by her reflection, which showed a different version of herself she could barely recognize. Her body didn't feel or seem like hers, even with not that many drastic changes overall; it still felt unnatural or unreal to see. Her shoulder blades appeared to have moved slightly sideways, her chest bones appearing wider, with slightly more defined muscle around her overall body, and a slightly more expanded rib cage, which all allowed but also forced her posture to be more quadruped than bipedal. Her body looked like it had fused with an entirely primal ancestral being similar to her species. But that wasn't all that made her reaction as heavy as it was for that moment.

Her teeth were, like she touched them, larger and more angular than her normal dentition was, despite always having had full blood carnivorous teeth. It now looked worse and more monstrous, horribly unsettling to see. Her eyes were the very thing that made her feel more confused about the whole ordeal, despite slightly recognizing this changed aspect of her. Like she vaguely remembered from the supermarket rampage from a few months ago, her pupils had seemingly narrowed themselves to yellow slits that appeared radiant with a strong, yellow glow, which enhanced the detail in her irises and sclerae, which were no longer dark brown and white in this state either. She still felt frozen in her pose as her pupils were slightly shaking and darting around as she tried to inspect herself. Her sclerae and irises had both turned bright orange, which appeared darker on the edges of her eyes and lighter

in the middle, where her pupils were, filling the rest of the eye with their yellow glow. Small red veins in the corners of her eyes, further away from her pupils, were more visible due to the increased blood pressure and bright, vibrant colors that her eyes had gotten. Her entire reflection felt like a nightmarish version of herself she had never expected to see herself as.

Her head still hurt, and the discomfort and unusualness in her shifted body made it hard to stay seated in this position and place, and she had to get up within the next minute. She wanted to sleep so badly, but felt awfully restless and scared for anyone else to see her like this as well. She even was about to point out to herself how she felt surprised by her ability to think, compared to her thoughts being limited by the earlier transformation, but that soon was a thought unformed when she started feeling her mind and sense of awareness fading. Her vision quickly went back to its earlier, blurry and disorienting state, seeing the blur morph into red streaks that distorted her perception. She couldn't even question her newfound urges and cravings at the back of her head anymore, which began to seep through to the foreground of her mind. It was as if this new, deformed form of her tried to turn her over to something more feral and primitive, from a deep aspect of her species and genes that was never even spoken about in her family. Was this a fate she was bound to live with? Her distressed and distorted mind became cluttered with the overwhelming sense of primal adrenaline and hunger, like a predator needing to hunt its own fuel to live. It was at that built-up point that she almost felt like she couldn't control herself when reaching for the door handle of the bedroom after she had gotten up on her quadruped posture again, with her horribly clawed paw stretching out to head inside and potentially catch up on any potential prey in her sight. But once her palm met the cold, hard surface of the door handle, she caught herself in the oddness of her behavior after getting her own senses back in what seemed to be a quick moment. She felt so uneasy and taken aback by the events of this night that she could only be glad her craving for meat got replaced by the craving for sleep. She tried to shut her waning brain off for a second while silently creeping inside the room after a few silent seconds, shut it behind her as quietly as possible, and snuck into her side of the bed, next to her husband. She rolled on her back and saw him lying next to her on the left, in the corner of

her vision. She could've really used a comforting hug from him right now to fall asleep better, but she didn't want to wake him up, and her weirdly aching body, along with the earlier glimpse of her own scary-looking eyes, made her hesitant. She prayed the effects would reverse themselves or disappear at her awakening the next morning, simply now having become too tired to look for a solution she already felt like was impossible to find at this hour. She turned on her side, her back facing her husband, and stared aimlessly with half-closed eyes at the door, noticing the outside light from the window making slight streaks on it, which could only indicate dawn wasn't much longer away. She closed her eyes, sweating a bit by the discomfort her body was causing her, but forced herself to stay quiet and not audibly express her distress as she slowly began dozing off from her exhaustion.

Chapter 8 - Support system

The dim fall sun crept through the curtains of the window the next day, early in the afternoon, after a rainstorm passed by and the sky had room for the sun to show itself again. Nicole was still sound asleep after her night of creeping around so late, and Richard, already awake, had left her to rest when he made his way to start the day earlier. He always was a very considerate guy, wanting to make sure his wife was looked out for and if it meant any small favor could already help her out, he wouldn't ever be willing to do less. He left the curtains closed and tried his best to get up as quietly as he could, knowing she needed her rest and well-deserved peace and quiet after her tedious nightshifts. Before he exited the room with his clean clothes draped on his shoulder, about to go upstairs for a shower, his head turned in her direction for a second, where she silently lay asleep in their bed with the sheets wrapped around her and raised til her cheek, covering half of her face, as she lay on her side, turned away from him. His expression turned to a frown for a moment as he recalled that the evening before was a weirdly eventful one. Karen from the Rainbow Factory had reached out and called him late in the evening via their house phone, not very long before he himself was headed to sleep, and she had let him know that a predicament had gotten Nicole injured and passed out. He didn't hesitate and didn't care about how late it was, having put on his jacket on top of his pajamas and rushed out the door to pick her up with their other car, the green minivan. At the time he had arrived at the main entrance of the office building, Karen already awaited him in the entry hall, standing next to Nicole, who was sitting in one of the chairs with a cup of water shakily being held in her paw as she had to put in great effort to keep her eyes open. The exhaustion was screaming from her face, and the shock from the predicament had left her speechless, even when she noticed her husband walking towards her to pick her up. She barely even remembered any of it on later notice, just the fact that she was brought home by the safe hands of her husband before passing out asleep on the couch after the drive.

A thin streak of sunlight was aimed directly onto Nicole's face as the rest of the room was still pretty darkened by the dense fabric of the closed curtains. It wasn't like sunlight had been that much of an issue in the past for her when taking naps; she was used to it pretty much as the night owl she always was, and from the occasional sets of nightshifts she took on. But this time, it managed to awaken her, the densely bright light trickling on her eyelids that eventually got her to open them. Her dark brown irises gleamed with a brighter gold as her dilated pupils rapidly narrowed in the beam of light. She nearly immediately closed her eyes again upon noticing the day had already begun and frowned with a groan before stretching out her arms above her, arching her back slightly, followed by a yawn. Once her eyes were opened again, they darted towards the side, glancing at the alarm clock that sat on her nightstand, and let out a soft sigh upon reading the time. It was a little after 1:00 PM, but despite her still present tiredness, she couldn't remember at what time she truly had fallen asleep the night before. Remembrance of the discomforting yet weird events from it began to creep into her mind, and she pressed her right paw softly against the back of her head, the pain from getting hit with the fire extinguisher miraculously having faded. She was taken aback by how aggressive she had become before Brandon truly lost his mind further in their argument. But even if she had that disturbing or intimidating demeanor, he had no right to physically assault her the way he did. She found it an actual miracle that no further damages were done other than her skull getting bashed in and the emptying of the fire extinguisher. The feline couldn't shake the thought of his words when Brandon had called her "psychotic" and multiple other insults for certain behaviors or aspects of her he clearly didn't understand. Meanwhile, it was he who nearly choked her to death with his gruesome decision to suffocate her with the chemical contents of the fire extinguisher he so brutally had torn from the wall. She scoffed out loud at the thought, having started to realize Brandon was a man who hid his own flaws by pointing the finger, and undoubtedly had some issues he needed to work on himself. Nicole shook her head after she finished that thought and got up from the bed, walked towards the window, and opened the curtains fully, embracing the sunlight beaming into the room and caressing her silhouette.

The feline stared outside for a moment, taking in the new day and thinking about what was ahead in her planning. She had two more night shifts to go until those were finally done for the time being, and could go back to her regular sleep and life schedule she usually had. She blinked slowly in her moment of tranquility as she allowed her mind and body to fully wake up for a moment. She felt like she lived at a pretty fast pace, which was how she usually described it, as if she sprinted through the weeks with each shift during her five-day workweeks, following up on another, giving her a stronger wave of time blindness. And before she knew it, a short-lived breather existed in her two-day weekends, returning to her desk in the blink of an eye as she barely had any time for herself. It both comforted and exhausted her. As the main provider of the house, a leading role was brought onto her, which she didn't mind all too much when it came to decision making and being able to fulfill the caretaking role she loved to have for her husband and kids. But it was often at her own cost, where she had the tendency to take on too many errands, even besides her full-time job at the office. She always had this nagging, gnawing feeling of responsibility, which could regularly rob her physical and mental energy, trading it for stress that had nowhere else to go but weigh on her shoulders. Richard hadn't been too aware of this stress and lack of breaks impacting her as much as it did at first, up until it showed more and more through her dysregulated emotions over the years in their marriage. Even though it took a bit of time, the rabbit was able to put together that Nicole was in desperate need of support, no matter how much she tried to pretend she was fine doing all on her own. He was aware of her innate emotional issues and challenges, such as her disordered mood regulation that was more often noticeable than not, and in the past years, he started trying his best to jump in as an attempt at carrying some of the weight on her shoulders. It was from that time on that he took on more of a proper househusband role. If his choice for unemployment stemming from his own low self-esteem complex meant for Nicole to keep the working role, he became willing to take over the house chores so she wouldn't have to feel burdened with them after each shift she came home. It was one of the actions Richard did that left Nicole grateful.

But even despite those changes having benefitted Nicole energy-

wise, she remained a very tired individual overall, her susceptibility to overworking herself and deep, heavy, and often lingering emotions destroying most of what she had left in her inner battery. Her life still felt fast-paced to her, but at least now she was able to be a bit more in touch with her own state of mind and even able to lie down for a nap, not having to worry about taking care of the house on her own anymore. Furthermore, their kids were in good hands under Richard's company, even if he retained the opposite of the righteously strict demeanor she possessed. It had been slightly challenging at first to keep the three siblings as disciplined as possible, for Richard's tendency to allow the kids nearly anything they wanted to do, opposed to Nicole needing the house stripped from chaos and destruction, even if it meant a few shouting fits from her end if she was met with such on a bad day. Her husband might've been too lax with them, but she also acknowledged her flawed lack of control over her anger, aware she was one to lash out too quickly when it wasn't always reasonable. It took months of tries for her and him to get more on the same page with how they wanted to keep their kids disciplined, but this effort was met with an outside change of situation that somehow had left the siblings more on their better sides. It had been evident to Nicole that they all, including her husband, had suffered a mild shock and mostly realization from the supermarket incident that had unpleasantly surprised them. It was an event Nicole still felt remorse and shame from, no matter how the vast majority of it had been out of her control, she struggled to accept it having happened and felt the responsibility for it weighing her down. But on the other hand, she felt love and warmth from her own family when they had begun proving to her they acknowledged her short fuse and frail emotionality, by showing their verbal support and a promise from her kids for them to be at their best behavior, which all three of them tried to stick by. In the end, Nicole couldn't be more glad with at least their willingness to be mindful of her need for rest nowadays, no matter if some slip-ups or arguments still happened. It was part of the deal; it was part of having a family.

Her thoughts then jolted away from how she was slightly reminiscing about her family's dynamic and the recent developments of such, not being able to help thinking back about the night before, where she had probably the strangest and most

distressing experience yet, of her body physically contorting and changing in the way it had done. She had no clue what it had to do with, only being able to question its connection to what had come over her during the supermarket incident those months ago. The colors of her eyes when they changed looked very similar to how she had seen them in her reflection during that rampage, and also matched the way Richard had described them to her when they had spoken about it shortly after the event. She never thought too much more of it in the months that had followed after that day up till now, formerly having brushed it away as just another one of her rage fits that messed around with some of her physical appearance. But this time it felt... stranger. It felt like it wasn't healthy, like it was some sort of symptom of an ailment she didn't know that was toying around with her body. She physically shook her head at that thought for a second, pure confusion seeping into her. She couldn't deny that it distressed her. The feline slowly turned her head away from the window, where she had been looking at the past moment during her train of thought, and took a few steps towards the vertical mirror that rested against the wall on the opposite side of their bed. Her reflection stared back at her, and even though nothing seemed wrong, her body looked as normal as it could be compared to the glimpses she saw the night before; she still felt as if she swallowed a block of concrete, it just didn't sit right. The physical changes she underwent were far from anything she had ever heard about before, undoubtedly supernatural in origin, but her lack of knowledge about this theme of phenomena left her questioning everything. She wasn't even sure if getting to know why or how it was happening to her could help her, but she could only hope for it to have been a one-time thing she didn't have to worry much about. The supermarket event was a bit of a while ago, and nothing out of the ordinary happened in the meantime. So why should she dwell on it now? She clearly woke up completely normal again, so maybe it was even just her sleep deprivation having turned her pain symptoms into a weird fever dream without her noticing? The latter was a thought of mixed coping and delusion she couldn't shake. She currently couldn't really remember if anything from her past was even connected to it. Even her mental illness seemed out of the question to be associated with it, as this was undoubtedly a separate, distressing factor on its own. She refused for it to be anything of the sort overall. Her ears pinned to

the back of her head while her face expressed a frown, not wanting to deal with any more of these situations or issues. She felt like she already had enough on her plate, and didn't want anything to further push her away from the normalcy she hoped to have in her life. This desire for peace and quiet, especially after the collection of events from her past, pushed her into denial. But a part of her knew it just being some sort of nightmare didn't make any sense either, for how clearly she was able to remember the individual contortions and changes in her body that occurred, how it looked, how it felt, and how it... sounded. Her muzzle wrinkled into an expression of disgust on her face once she recalled how disturbingly unnatural the noise from her disfiguring bones and flesh had sounded. Painful and discomforting, yet so... disgusting. She just wanted it to be a nightmare and head further into her daily life the way she already was doing.

Ah fuck, 2 PM, she cursed at herself in thought, the next second, once she caught a glimpse of the clock again. She had been wandering in her thoughts for a bit too long and snapped herself back into action, grabbing a clean set of her uniform from the wardrobe. She had to be prepared for her next night shift later on and already felt like she had woken up late enough, so she took stronger steps towards the stairs to head up and shower for the new day.

Nicole entered the kitchen with a brief yawn, all freshened up, and her hair, tail, and tufts of fur on her elbows still mildly damp from the water. Richard was sitting at the dining table with a newspaper in hand, looking up while lowering it once he heard her walking down the stairs and into the kitchen. She made herself a cup of instant coffee and opened the fridge to see what she could whip up for an easy breakfast, or well, lunch at this point. The bunny's ears flopped downwards upon his worries, which seemed to enter his thoughts once he began to recall the way he witnessed her upon picking her up the night before. Acknowledging she must've been exhausted, he didn't want to bother her too much with potentially tiresome questions to talk about the event, but he also knew it was important for him to know what had happened, as well as showing he wanted to help her out if it was anything she could use his support with. He took his chance as soon as his wife turned herself

around to face the kitchen counter, and she approached to sit down on the stool beside it. Her eyes met his, and she hadn't even noticed him sitting at the table until now, her still slightly present grogginess having misted up her awareness for a moment.

Nicole: Oh, hey! Good morning, hun, it seems like I completely missed ya there.

Richard: Good afternoon, dear.

He softly chuckled during his sentence with a smile tugging at his snout once he gently corrected her time of day. Nicole had a habit of waking up late when she was in need of a lot of rest during her days off or in general when she had the opportunity to sleep in. Though especially that day she needed it the most, neither he nor she brushed over the tiresome happenings that unfolded the night before. Richard felt greatly for Nicole and worried she still was doing unwell, yet struggled to bring it up at that moment, so he stood up to approach her from the other side of the kitchen counter and reach out his arms on top of it, placing his paws on top of hers whilst not breaking the eye contact he initiated with her.

Nicole: Ah, yeah, afternoon. Of course. I'm probably forever gonna mess that one up with my inconsistent sleep patterns.

The feline grinned with a timid exposure of her teeth as she spoke with a twinge of self-deprecation. She still had dark bags under her eyes despite the hours she seemed to have been out after her long night, but she at least looked less disheveled, and the stress gnawing at her innards had subsided for now.

Richard: No worries, sweetheart. If anything, you have every right to be tired; you had a rough night.

He hoped his remark wasn't already too much of a pry, as he couldn't help but want her to air out what had been going on and if she felt any better. He pleaded with her eyes as he slightly lost himself in the dark shade of her brown irises, nearly dark enough to make her pupils disappear in the mildly dim lighting that was present in the room, but he still could tell her eyes were relaxed from the large, circular shape her pupils had at that moment. She

caught onto the way he was looking at her and felt a hint of his concern radiating from his expression and being. At this inner feeling of hers, her ears slightly folded to the side as they left their perked-up position, and her facial muscles relaxed, making her smile disappear. After breaking eye contact with him for a second by turning her head downwards a little, she raised it and found his bright, sky blue eyes again before letting out a sigh.

Nicole: Yeah... You can call it a rough night for sure. Thanks again for picking me up so late, honey. I wouldn't know how else I was supposed to get home at that point.

Richard: Absolutely no problem, dear. I was glad that Karen called me as soon as possible.

Nicole averted her gaze another time after having looked at his face for a second, as she read the room of him, most likely waiting for her to elaborate on the event. She took a deep breath to gather herself and once again let her eyes meet his; this time her gaze seemed a tad more intense. The pink rabbit waited intently as he expected her to speak, but tried his best to keep his worries composed once he felt the shift in her eyes.

Nicole: I know I owe you an immediate explanation, overall, but also at least after all the efforts you put in to take care of me last night. So, I'm not gonna beat around the bush, but I'll have to admit this... run-in with the new coworker I had mentioned to you recently hadn't ended up in the greatest of places.

Richard's brows slightly furrowed as he couldn't hide his worried expression any longer, as it became more overt on his face, even though Nicole had long picked up on it already.

Nicole: An argument I ended up having with him seemed to have started as a final way for me to voice my boundaries to him and reflect on what his problem was the first time he met me. It's a long story, but it eventually escalated to the bastard absolutely losing his shit and bashing my skull in with a fire extinguisher. Just ripped it from the wall like that.

The rabbit's heart ached at the words she told, and his right paw

slightly clenched on hers. He seemed a little unsure of what to respond after the first few seconds of silence after she finished her sentence, but gathered his thoughts.

Richard: Oh man, what a twisted scumbag. What the hell was he even thinking?!

As soon as his response left Richard's mouth, his left leg involuntarily thumped on the floor beneath him, where he was standing and leaning against the counter. His eyes darted down at his hip for a second, taken aback a little by his own physical reaction, before meeting his wife's face again. She mentally acknowledged the thump of his leg that correlated with his noticeable strain of emotion that he felt from what she told him, but chose not to pay attention to it as her mind clouded itself with sudden surges of resentment and anger after starting to think deeply about the situation again. Her face wasn't any less animated when it came to exposing her shifts in emotion she was unable to mask properly, and it contorted to a deep frown, accommodating the way her ears now absolutely flattened backwards. She couldn't help but feel like the situation was so unfair. All the guilt she had started to feel and realize from having gotten to know the true impact her attack had on the Scotths brothers, both of them, began to wane. Along with the mess of encounters she had been having with Brandon, his assault broke the rope that held her back from allowing herself to become provoked, and it left nothing but a bad taste in her mouth about the man. It didn't even feel like a taste of her own medicine anymore, as all of his harm had been entirely intentional so far, and even as soon as she had realized the wrongdoing on her part in the conflict, it had become very evident he was unwilling to set their differences aside or reach any form of understanding.

Nicole: Argh! I know, I know... There's no doubt I will be pressing a form of charges or get him confronted with a third party.

She didn't break eye contact with her husband as her angry expression kept him alert. Her tail made slow curves in the air as it restlessly waved around behind her, until she shook her head and her emotions began to drastically shift once again within her after less than five minutes of anger she felt. Her face relaxed, but the

corners of her mouth only so slightly pulled downwards, her mind sorrowing to melancholy.

Nicole: I'm sorry, the last thing I wanna do is make you worry too much about me, but I know it's important to keep you aware.

Richard: I know, and I always much rather have you tell me anything, honey. I told you before, you can always share anything, and I wanna be able to support you in any difficulties you are facing. It's no mystery to me that you have trouble telling stuff that bothers you at times, but I'm happy enough that you remember you can.

Nicole nodded as she took in his words, as a reminder to herself, she didn't need to worry as much about his feelings about her venting than she usually did. She was known to have trouble with opening up and asking for help or support during difficult times she was experiencing, always feeling the need to rely solely on herself, while not wanting to burden others with her issues. It was a rather damaging mindset she had grown into from her teen years, purely because she didn't feel like she was taken seriously and was told not to "over exaggerate" her difficulties, often when referring to her drastic mood changes and strong emotions overall. It left her a bit in the dark and, like a dog biting its own tail, learned over time she was in strong need of a support system, even if it already only consisted of her husband; she had to stop thinking she had to do everything by herself. Her sense of responsibility for her own suffering often brought more harm to herself than good, but it remained a flaw she tried to work on. Richard caught the way she went quiet for a moment after, and his eyes traveled from her paw he was still holding back towards her face. Even when in distress, with the way he always cared deeply about her and wanted to make sure she felt supported, he couldn't deny how beautiful he found her face each time when looking at it. Both supportive and respectful, he never hid his admiration for her and his many reasons for why she was his one and only to him. As if she was able to sense the warmth from his inner thoughts inside his mind, her blue mood subsided a little bit and showed a modest, slight smile on her snout when she had taken the time to really listen to his words. It was simply his support she needed to hear from time to time, no matter

how often, she relied on it the most when it came to coexisting with her brain, which hadn't always been the most trustworthy or emotionally strong enough.

Richard: By the way, would you like me to drive you to work later today for your shift? I figured it would be necessary since our yellow Cartax is still parked there.

He nudged her a little with his wording as a grin playfully painted his expression. Nicole narrowed her eyes as she had almost forgotten about having left the car behind at the parking lot since the events had gone down the night before.

Nicole: Oh, yes, please? If you could, that would be amazing. I nearly forgot.

Richard: It's the least I can do, alright? I'll make sure to have dinner ready for all of us quickly, so that you don't have to be as stressed heading to the office again.

The feline nodded and, at this point in their conversation, had finally finished her late breakfast, after stalling in between their talking. She was about to get up to put her plate on the countertop next to the sink, but her husband quickly stopped her in her tracks when he leaned forward and gently grabbed her face with both of his large paws, giving her a little peck on the nose. Her eyes fluttered as she was positively taken aback by this gesture and smiled.

Richard: And one more thing, try not to worry too much about telling me what's up, alright? Please, if anything, keep me updated about how this situation gets resolved and what they'll say about it at work tonight.

Nicole nodded again with a soft exhale this time, knowing he was right yet still feeling cautious about what had happened. She couldn't shake the fact that she began to feel rather tense and worried deeply inside about facing Mr. Yoshida at her shift later, not knowing how she could properly defend her part in the conflict. She hoped her boss would be able to see the truth and look at the situation in a fully unbiased way, disconnected from the way he had

been talking to her lately. She could only hope and see for now.

Chapter 9 - Pressure

The Thursday night of Nicole's next shift after the staircase incident began as any other night shift she had been plowing through the past time, but it was purely her meandering and disorganized thoughts that made it feel uneasy already since the very first ten minutes she had set foot into the office building. The feline knew she had a strong tendency to stay worried for elongated amounts of time when it came to situations and their potential outcomes she wasn't sure about, especially conflicts. Despite her nature of being able to stand up for herself when needed, it remained something that required a lot of energy from her, which she often lacked, and a heavy load of emotions alongside it. She hated being part of conflicts, whether or not she shared part of the blame. The entirety of the evening that unfolded once she clocked in the very first moment, her extensive worrying and uncertainty gnawed at her in a sense that almost felt physical, as her muscles felt tense and she felt a bit of pressure weighing on her chest. For the first time in a while, she had a rather timid demeanor as soon as she had reached the floor of her cubicle and padded towards her workspace with a slouchy posture, carrying her purse and clipboard clutched to her chest like a lost puppy. It didn't help that her tail felt as if it was gonna float its own way, with how restlessly it was waving around, in an uncontrolled motion that her body physically expressed her unease and stress with. Having reached her desk, she sat down on the swivel chair and logged onto the computer to set up her work for the night. She wasn't sure how well she'd be able to focus, especially now that Brandon was seemingly absent; there was a heavier load of delayed accountancy work that had to be taken care of. She hadn't seen any glimpse of him once she had entered, but wasn't as surprised either due to the nature of the injury he had gotten. Even though fully accidental and remorseful, Nicole couldn't deny the fact that if her reflexes hadn't protected her, a lot worse could've gone down. She shook her head at her thoughts, as she simply wished none of this had happened at all, and hated the way her guilt didn't stop nagging at her. No matter Brandon's intentions, she felt guilty for what she had done and couldn't stop thinking

about how the whole ordeal still originated from an incident that she had her paws on before as well. Her thoughts got her mind in such a twist that she began failing to remember the supermarket events had happened in a situation of discontrol as well, and the shame and guilt from it returned in stronger waves.

She attempted shutting her brain off and made note of the scheduled spreadsheet work assigned to her that had high priority this shift, opening her online work calendar. The feline briefly tilted her neck to both sides to crack her stiff joints loose and glared at the list of client names highlighted in red, those who were waiting on their overdue spreadsheets and payment receipts. She knew she couldn't afford to lose focus now, especially if there wouldn't be an immediate temporary replacement employee for Brandon to help her out. She quickly clutched her chest for a few seconds as her stress increased at the thought. Coffee. That was the only tangible thing she could think of to help her brain rearrange itself and order the chaos. Trying to push away the gnawing worry - but failing to no avail - she stepped towards the coffee machine that stood in the opposite corner of the office and helped herself to a cup after flicking in a few coins. The feline took a deep breath and was eventually closer towards getting her mindset ready to focus on the deadlines, but was interrupted in her pace back to her cubicle by none other than Mr. Yoshida, who greeted her with a serious look in his eyes.

Yoshida: Good evening, Nicole.

She felt a cold shiver run down her spine as she was nearly entirely sure she knew what he was approaching her for. Her grip on the coffee cup tightened only so slightly, as her eyes widened whilst trying her hardest not to let her stress overflow from the visible outside.

Nicole: Hi... good evening, sir.

Yoshida: You can probably already guess what I wanted to talk about, right?

Nicole gave him a slow, passive nod, her eyelids relaxing in a defeated manner before she silently began to pad behind her boss

after he non-verbally instructed her to follow him. He took her to his office, where he still didn't speak a single word until the door was closed and the feline sat down on the chair in front of his desk. The humanoid stood tall with his gray clouds gently waving in thin air as his almost mythological-like species further amplified his intimidating look. His teeth were reminiscent of a Japanese oni, but the cloud-based nature of his family's species made them all appear much more elegant and sophisticated. It was known that their nature stemmed from their descendants of ancient weather deities that thrived centuries ago, and their family tree was mostly respected amongst others who knew. The Yoshidas were rich and had no one else to thank than the father figure himself for having founded the Rainbow Factory as a successful CEO. In other words, Nicole both admired and feared the family. Not for their intimidating demeanor itself per se, but the sheer fact that her entire livelihood from work lay in Mr. Yoshida's hands as her employer, and her personal feelings towards them often had to be pushed down since he could easily replace her in the company if he wanted to. It was something at stake for her as the only breadwinner of her household, especially as they already struggled to get by often enough. This pressure had faded for a while after she had reconciled with Yuki, Mr. Yoshida's wife and her best friend from childhood, who had challenged her a while ago. Their feud had resulted in a fight that Yuki so strongly initiated for honor, despite Nicole's absolute unwillingness to ever raise her fists again. But both of them were more glad than ever to have put their differences aside, and the short-lived battle had resulted in the return of their peace towards one another, stronger than before. But this pressure of staying on the Yoshidas' good side had made its return the second the predicaments with Brandon started. Mr. Yoshida softly tugged at the curtain of his office window a little, and the exposed sky with stars was visible behind his desk. Sitting down as well, he turned in his chair to face the feline's mildly nervous statue and finally broke the ice after a couple of minutes that felt metaphorically stone cold to Nicole. *He was gonna talk about what happened yesterday.*

Yoshida: I don't want to beat around the bush for a single second, as we all have enough work left to do here, but it's gotten to my attention that a bit of an event went down the night before, and I'm

allowing you to briefly tell your side of the story.

Nicole sighed and straightened her posture in the chair.

Nicole: Yes, it was quite a thing. Sir, I am more than willing to enlighten you on what exactly went down and why, but I must first ask: have you... already had contact with... Brandon about this?

The cloud humanoid rested his elbows on his desk and slightly furrowed his brows, as he was only slightly aware that she hoped for his unbiased opinion about the situation.

Yoshida: I have, in full honesty. Mr. Scotths's story seemed fair but felt only a slight bit vague due to his wording, so I was left a bit unsure, but I already wanted to hear both of you out in the first place. So, I was wondering if you had potentially more to add?

Nicole's expression intensified as her ears pulled backwards only halfway behind her head, and her tail had finally rested itself as it hung down the chair, entirely still. *What had Brandon even told him?*

Nicole: Well, I could elaborate depending on what he has told you, if you could share?

Yoshida: I called him immediately after he took a sick leave, and one of the janitors, out of all people, had driven him to the hospital for urgent care. His eye got severely injured and was taken care of today, but he left me with a story that both of you were involved in an accident due to an old fire extinguisher having shot loose from a staircase fall. He mentioned the chemicals had left you disoriented and ended up clawing into his eye in a state of frenzy.

What the fuck?! There's barely any truth to that!

Nicole: Ah, right. Well, I'm gonna have to correct that a little bit if I may, as this is not exactly how this went down, you see.

Yoshida: Please do. To be fair, I felt a little bit skeptical about the fire extinguisher going loose, since it takes quite some effort to take them from their wall sockets.

Nicole: That's the thing, *he* actually ripped it from the wall,

whether you believe it or not. We got into an argument that spiraled out of control, and resulted in him committing an assault that left me with nothing but my reflexes to save my breath once he tried to suffocate me with that thing. You know, cats don't claw unless they're cornered.

At her last sentence, she felt a hint of shame pulling at her face, and the corners of her mouth lowered a bit further once she averted her gaze from Mr. Yoshida. He couldn't believe what he was hearing and only slightly doubted if she was telling the full truth as well, but was still skeptical of Brandon's version due to Nicole's details making more sense than his in the objective context.

Yoshida: I see. I can't help but admit it's hard for me to pick a side specifically, when we do not have camera surveillance in that lower part of the staircase, and I'm left with taking either of your words for it. I've had my doubts about your performance before, Nicole, but I would struggle with believing you'd ever actually raise your claws in such bloodshed for no reason. It's tough, but I want to allow you to prove your accountability at least, and advise that you pay Brandon a visit at the hospital. Just because of such an ugly injury still having been inflicted, warranted or not, it would be the least you could do.

The feline nodded with a large hint of relief in her expression. A lot of weight about the situation's outcome was lifted from her shoulders once she realized Mr. Yoshida was not giving her up and even listened to what she had to say with zero bias. He knew she was a reliable employee, based on her overall performance in her years of service so far since the company was founded, even if the Factory was still considerably new. Her saleswoman position was easily replaceable, which often drove her fear of ever potentially losing her job, but the more recent state of the company proved that she was still very much needed, and the overall team was still being expanded to this day. She didn't have to be as afraid as she was, even if that underlying worry was hard to ignore. But Yoshida's now proven trust in her gave her even stronger relief than she felt before.

Nicole: I will. And you're right, the claws that injured him still belong to me, and I would've done nothing less to own up to it.

When it comes to these predicaments, I promise you I won't let you down in preventing them from happening again.

Yoshida: Good. Thanks for your time. You can head back to your own desk now. I'll make sure to get another team member to get on your list of overdues as soon as possible. For now, just make sure to focus on the highlighted client names marked with prio; their sheets need to be on the way to their inbox before this night ends.

Nicole got up with her coffee cup still in hand, having entirely forgotten about it during their conversation as the contents went cold.

Nicole: Got it. I'll make sure to hand the remaining client phone numbers over to my new teammate once they're ready to set up, so they won't have to dig for them themselves.

Yoshida: Thanks, Nicole. Good luck.

She gave her boss a respectful, modest smile before leaving his office and returning to her desk. It was as if the weight off her shoulders ignited her work focus to its original level, and she was back in the zone in no time.

• • •

It was a little after 9 AM when Nicole had clocked out from her shift and had driven towards the lot of Elmore Hospital, planning to drop by that same morning before going home. She utterly disliked the idea of showing any compliant compassion, especially when the person on the receiving end was Brandon, but she couldn't deny Mr. Yoshida was right, and showing a sign of caring as well as apologizing was the most decent thing to do. She didn't want to wait too long either, and her current state of feeling clearer in her mind was something she wanted to make use of to be able to approach him properly, also due to not knowing if she would have that same energy in the upcoming days. It was the right timing for visitor hours, and despite her brain's current desire for sleep, she physically felt awake enough still. She parked the car in the lot, behind the building, and let the engine run for a bit while staring at the minimal number of other visitors' cars that were parked. It was

quite early to be visiting patients, especially during a weekday when most people had shifts to run that would already have started. An odd feeling for sure when she thought about it, but it made Nicole miss her regular 9-to-5s a little after the past week had beaten her up til exhaustion, and she couldn't wait to get back to normal office hours after this week. It was Friday morning, so there was just one more night shift to go until she could reset her sleep schedule and spend more waking hours with her family again. *Still worth it, still a good time,* the feline thought to herself. She only took on these night shifts at crucial times for the company when more employees were needed at night temporarily, and it paid her a reasonable bonus that managed to ease her financial stress a little in hindsight. Her family was considerably poor, but thanks to her occasional night shift bonuses, they were well off in survival at least. It was these more recent years when Nicole had finally started getting her records in order and began to properly track her and her family's spending habits, alongside keeping a firmer eye out on their financial state and saving up. It allowed her to breathe more properly when it came to financial stats and the idea of scraping by; this now decreased amount of stress from it gave her room to think about other things. For example, now trying to make amends with someone who at this point could easily be irredeemable and putting in the strongest efforts to swallow her defensiveness down in the face of acting like a decent person.

She turned off the engine after a couple of minutes of being lost in her own thoughts, getting out and locking the car upon a slight turn of her upper body. Her whiskers agitatedly itched the very second she approached the main entrance of the hospital after walking around the block. Trying to shake the weariness from her physical tiredness, she repressed a yawn and softly scratched the roots of her whiskers before taking another step forward. The hospital itself too seemed calm at this hour, not a surprise when it came to the visitors, based on the obviously uncrowded parking lot. But there weren't even too many nurses going around, potentially meaning it was a bit of a slow, yet mundane start of the day for the staff. Upon entering the main hallway, Nicole greeted a few of the workers with a gentle, respectful nod each time she made eye contact with one walking past her. She followed the ceiling signs pointing towards the direction of the unit that took care of more delicate surgeries,

where she expected Brandon to be resting after his eye treatment the day before. The clinical unit's secretary was alerted to the feline's approach once she walked through the last set of doors and greeted her once she stood in front of the desk. A brief, professional interaction followed, where Nicole answered the secretary's question about her being a coworker visiting and, in return, received the number of the room he was residing in. The feline thanked her and was on her way as she padded towards the room at the far end of the next hallway. She had left her purse in the car, not that she would need it, but it felt a little odd not to have something to clutch when the approach towards the room began to increase her nervousness. She didn't hesitate for too long once she stood in front of the entrance, trying to prevent herself from stalling, and made her way into the room with a passive posture. There she saw Brandon on his own in the room that had space for four individual patients, as he was sitting up in his bed with a large patch of cotton covering his left eye that was bound on his head with bandages. The dull shade of his orange skin completely contrasted with the casual wear he was able to be dressed in, now that his surgery was completed, which consisted of a dark gray sweater and denim blue sweatpants. His pitch-black hair was slightly ruffled, mostly indicating he probably hadn't woken up too long ago, as he entertained himself this morning with some background noise from the TV playing some show about real estate. He didn't care for anything available to stream, but simply hoped to kill some time and diffuse the silence the room otherwise would've had.

Due to his newfound monocular vision, he had barely started getting used to his larger blind spot now and didn't notice Nicole slowly walking in from the room's entrance on his left side. The sound of the TV also made him unable to pick up on his environment properly by hearing, which made it even more of an unexpected sight when he turned his head slightly and finally caught a glimpse of the blue feline's silhouette, who now stood barely two feet away from his bed. He audibly gasped to his own dismay and visibly contorted a bit in fear from top to toe. It was a reaction he himself didn't plan on giving, but he couldn't help it was the last thing he ever expected to see, the face of the very cat who was the reason for him being in this current state. Nicole's eyes

slightly widened at his reaction, a mix of discomfort and concern tugging at her expression for a moment. He reached for the remote at the foot of the bed and turned off the TV to make room for their voices.

Brandon: What the-?! What are *you* doing here?!

Nicole: Eh? I'm sorry if I scared you; that was the last thing I intended by showing up.

Brandon: I don't give a flying fuck about your intentions, especially not right now. As you can see, I am in a little *predicament* here!

He angrily pointed at the bandages covering his eye with his left hand and spoke with deep hatred seeping into his face that replaced the fear he had only a few seconds ago. Even beside the situation itself, he also felt frustrated by how vulnerable he felt in the position he was currently in, bandaged up and resting in a hospital bed, wearing his most comfortable but also least imposing outfit. He hated it. As he lowered his hand again after making his statement, Nicole's ears drooped further downward in pure remorse, as his physical injury remained something she still couldn't deny responsibility for. Even though he was the one who had provoked her, and the situation went south so badly that it resulted in nothing but an act of self-defense, the feline knew how much nasty damage her claws were capable of and felt guilty for that reflex having resulted this way.

Nicole: I'm sorry. I really am, Brandon. That is literally the only reason why I showed up, to tell you that.

The humanoid's expression softened up a little after taking in her words for a second, not having expected her to even utter them like this. He then felt a wave of disgust run through him, similarly to how he felt it before, simply from how soft she seemed to come across. He hated being pitied by her, that was for sure. But deep down, he was strongly in denial about his stubbornness towards making up with those who wronged him, at least in his eyes. She didn't seem to entirely match the picture of a perpetrator that caused him the damage he so viscerally felt the need to take revenge for, and it drove him to spite. Revenge, that concept had

only recently started to stir in his mind.

Brandon: Well, sorry isn't gonna bring back vision in my left eye, is it?! You're the last person I am willing to face right now.

Nicole: I understand. I do not need your forgiveness, nor do I expect it from you. But it at least felt decent to show that I care, somewhat, and refuse to throw dirt on others to escape the responsibility of making amends with them if I'm having issues with them.

Nicole's voice was stern and cold, even the slightest hint of compassion having run thin the second his hateful tone hit her ears. She couldn't get rid of the guilt from what she was responsible for, but didn't feel that remorse towards him, just the situation itself. She acted in self-defense when the tables could've been easily turned in that dispute if she hadn't, making her end up in a hospital gown instead, or worse, dead. Brandon caught onto her mild hints of irritation and snarkiness in her last remark and narrowed his visible eye.

Brandon: I'm sorry, what? I thought I had explained to you that I wasn't willing to "make amends" with you, after the vicious nature of your violence ticked me off.

Nicole: The vicious nature of what? Violence? From an *uncontrolled accident* involving your brother, which I tried to apologize for, only for you to throw your hateful beliefs about my *species* in my face? Oh, I'm sorry, I meant the absolutely *violent* way you definitely assaulted me with a fire extinguisher in an attempt to suffocate me to death!

Brandon: Oh, darn you. You know you had it coming, intimidating me with your scary, weird antics and then expecting me to act fully rational in response?!

Nicole: You could've killed me, Brandon. A cat doesn't claw unless it's cornered.

A brief sign of calm seemed to emanate from Brandon's quickly diffusing demeanor once he slowly turned his face away and broke

eye contact with her. It looked as if the reality of their situation Nicole served up to him finally struck him where it needed to. But to her unfortunate, he remained unwilling to accept she was right.

Nicole: I also don't appreciate how you've been creating a fictional version of what went down Wednesday night when informing Mr. Yoshida about it. You're a liar, and you know it.

Brandon: I lost myself in that moment, you freak. You yourself might believe you're the only one who deserves consideration for all that you "cannot control," but I won't care about it. I simply tried to save face for the littlest trust I got left from that company, right when my onboarding was going so smoothly and successfully.

Nicole: I don't pride myself on making others pity my sob story. I literally cannot care a single bit less about what you think of me or my personal baggage. And job-wise? You barely started, you got nothing to lose, young man. Plenty of other jobs on the market to scour for, because I'm sure our boss won't like an untrustworthy, destructive idiot running beside his successors on the office floor.

Brandon: This job was one of the last resorts I was able to settle for, after getting denied at so many places, so you're selfish for thinking I deserve to rot on the streets. Even if it doesn't pay spectacularly, I am content enough with it and not a mother, like you, who depends on fighting off the younger ones in the team that challenge your position at work.

Nicole: What does my personal life have to do with this? You're simply coping with knowing you're at high risk of getting fired now that Yoshida knows the full story.

Brandon's frown deepened once his previous hateful expression had made its return in the past few exchanges. It pissed him off that she was right, once again. He couldn't stay in denial for much longer, but still managed to hide that.

Nicole: I came here to apologize, not to linger on stupid shit that doesn't add to this situation, or for you to start arguing. Get some help for your issues once you're recovered, and get well soon for now. I'll see myself out.

The blue feline, who had been standing during their conversation this whole time, simply turned around swiftly and took a step towards the exit of the room again, not planning on allowing him to get on her nerves much longer. She didn't really expect any possible encounter to have been better than the one that just unfolded, but it still left her with a bad taste in her mouth. Though unfortunately, the encounter wasn't as over as she thought it was, freezing once Brandon uttered his next sentence.

Brandon: I have a feeling I know what you truly are, Nicole.

Nicole: What?

Unfreezing in her steps, she turned around ever so slightly, enough to look at the humanoid who challenged her curiosity. Brandon spoke with a new layer of antagonism in his voice.

Brandon: Those disturbing, glowy eyes of yours that you showed at the staircase. You're hiding something inside you're hoping to get away with for the rest of your existence.

The feline's muzzle wrinkled and exposed her upper set of teeth when she realized what he was referring to, and it brought her nothing but discomfort and stress that morphed into anger. She knew the phenomenon of her eyes wasn't a one-off thing and had occurred for a small number of times now, but the absolutely confusing and distressing nature of her nearly transformative changes she experienced the night before made it a more sensitive subject. She wasn't sure if there was any direct correlation between the two, but what she did know was that Brandon had his own speculations about it now as well. It felt intimidating, especially when she herself still had absolutely no clue what potentially even went on that night or what caused it.

Nicole: I don't want you to stick your nose into my business, *pendejo*. You seriously have to stop this creepy obsession over my personal matters; it's getting ridiculous!

Brandon: Well, who knows? Maybe this "creepy obsession" might turn into valid investigative work that could potentially save some lives out there in the future.

Nicole: What?! What does that even mean?!

Brandon: You're no normal cat, Watterson. C'mon, get your hairy face out of the denial now... I'll make it my job to find you out and make sure the blinding of my eye didn't happen for nothing.

Brandon's stone-cold expression when he spoke those words freaked Nicole out, and she felt the fur on her back rise the longer she stood in her current pose.

Nicole: You're a strange guy, Brandon. Whatever you're yapping about, it ain't healthy, and I am out of here.

The cat didn't wait for a potential follow-up line from him and walked out of the room without looking behind her at a quicker pace than she had originally entered with, making her way back to the main entrance of the hospital to go home. On her pace back, she didn't even take the time to properly lift her head and look any of the bypassing workers in the eye. Her heart was racing in her chest at this point, and her whiskers itched worse now, as she began to doubt whether or not she regretted having come here. Maybe it was fine, as she tried her best at an attempt to show compassion to Brandon, even if she was completely unable to do so anymore, but felt bad about allowing herself to get so defensive again. It was something she just couldn't help, but knew it was for the best to get out as soon as possible and return to the comfort of her own home. Even if that comfort would be disturbed on and off by her lingering thoughts that were glued to the distressing nature of Brandon's words. It was at the point of almost having fully approached her car in the parking lot when she felt the stress building inside her was reaching a more overwhelming level, and she had to physically halt herself and breathe in the open air for a moment. Her eyes began to tear up a little, and she could only hope no one would be there to witness her nervous breakdown in the public space like that.

Chapter 10 - Canine compassion

Errands were absolutely overflowing from a list that was written in a notebook that lay open on a red car's dashboard, which was parked not so far away from the yellow family wagon. A large bag of groceries rested in the trunk, and the inside of the car filled up with the strong scent of lavender perfume as its driver had hastily gotten herself ready for the day, partly during the drive. The door opened, and the busy bee revealed herself, stepping out of the small vehicle and locking it without a care for what she should be taking with her, about to make her way into the hospital for a visit. She was a lean, well-dressed female retriever in her late twenties with tidy fur, floppy ears, long fur across her neck and throat, and a thick, fluffy tail that nearly resembled a feather duster. She was wearing a pitch-black jacket, with a light lilac, puffy blouse underneath, accompanied by dark gray flare pants and a broad belt with a large silver buckle. The sun ever so slightly beamed through the open spaces that formed in between the clouds, and the light cast onto her pearly white fur nearly reflected. For a "wet-nose," a common slang term for the dog humanoid species such as hers, the young woman prioritized her appearance and the way she presented herself at most given moments. She, species-wise, leaned more towards a humanoid based on the plantigrade construction of her legs, along with the necessity of wearing shoes instead of it purely being a fashionable choice. It's not that she cared too much about these details regarding every anthropomorphic animal that resided in Elmore, but her more stark human physique made her feel a bit like one of a kind. In the past, it used to be a matter she was a little insecure about, but upon growing up, she had found the comfort and enjoyment of being able to style more options shoe-wise, in contrast to her fellow anthros, who had digitigrade legs. The white canine pulled the sleeve of her jacket back to check the time on her watch and took a deep breath when she realized she had enough time to continue her list of to-dos that were set for the day. It was barely after 10.30 and she knew that despite the large

amount of tasks she was hoping to fit in her single day off, she still needed to take a step back to chill out at times. Since her current week was quite full due to her job, she still had it in her to plan a moment to visit a friend who had been at the hospital since the day before. The hospitalization was unexpected in nature, but she cared to reach out as soon as she could and even felt lucky for having this Friday off to be able to do so.

It didn't take longer than walking a few feet until the white canine was met with the sight of a female feline breaking down in the same lane of the lot where her car was parked. The dog felt glad to know she no longer needed to be in much of a hurry, so she could at least go up to the woman to offer help. She was always very soft in nature, specifically when it came to wanting to help others in distress, regardless of how well she knew them or knew them at all. It meant a lot to her if she was able to help someone or at least make them feel a little better, not doubting wanting to attempt the same for the feline in distress. She saw how she shakily held one paw against her chest and the other nearing her throat, frozen in her steps and panting almost quietly as tears streamed down her face, a clear textbook nervous breakdown if she ever saw one. The woman had a shade of dimmed cerulean blue fur, dressed in quite corporate attire based on the white blouse and gray wide-pleated skirt, and was visibly older than she was herself, but didn't want to mentally cause offense if she guessed her age wrong, in case she'd be younger than she looked, but the dog guessed she pushed her forties at least. She didn't waste any more time on her monologuing thoughts and quickly approached the feline, trying to get her attention without potentially startling her.

White retriever: Hey, miss? Are you alright?

The unexpected, yet soft tone of the canine caught Nicole utterly off guard once she noticed the young woman had approached her during the chokehold of her breakdown. Her eyes shot open, and she tried to ease her panting into normal breathing before she'd form any words to speak up. But if anything, the caring and mildly reassuring expression on the dog's face helped with scraping her scattered brain together a bit better.

White retriever: I mean, it's kind of a dumb question, as I can tell

you're obviously not doing great, but it happens to be what people often say when they want to help, I suppose.

The canine spoke with a modest, slightly shy smile as her eyes showed as much of a caring demeanor as her voice did. Nicole felt embarrassed as soon as her nervousness had less of a clutch on her innards and was able to think straight again, having broken down for anyone around to see. It was a little reassuring at least, to see there still weren't many people around, once she turned her head to her sides for a moment, but the white retriever in front of her seemed to have cared enough to approach her. The cat straightened her back and took a deep breath while meeting the young woman at eye level, who wasn't more than an inch taller than her.

Nicole: Oh man, how long have I been spilling my waterworks over this parking lot?

She rubbed her eyes with her right paw, and the frown on her face relaxed to a passive expression before slowly getting her normal train of thought back.

White retriever: Hey, it's quite all right. It's dead silent out here right now, but I couldn't help but want to see what was up. I only hope you're okay, though, or else if there's something I can do to help?

Nicole: Oh, I appreciate your concern a lot, sweetheart. Honestly, I don't really want to be a burden, as there might be some things going on for me at the same time right now, but I'll manage. It's all good.

White retriever: Are you sure? I don't expect you to share personal matters, of course, but it's just that your breakdown made me worry that something needed to be taken care of right away.

Nicole sighed as she was right, knowing she wasn't fully in a proper state yet to drive home, and a lot on her mind needed to be spilled out, hence the buildup had been strong enough to cause her to break down in public. Her ears pulled back slightly as she fidgeted a little with the collar of her blouse, debating if she should really discuss more personal matters with this stranger she had just met.

She could tell the young dog meant well and couldn't deny her attitude was very consoling and helpful right now, so she stared in silence for a few seconds while visibly considering it in thought.

Nicole: I- I dunno. There's nothing really to be done about it, other than me trying to get my thoughts in a row properly. I'm having a little dispute with someone, you see, and it just didn't really come at the right time with other things.

The feline decided to just try to keep it to surface level, sharing a little bit if it meant it could at least calm her down at this moment.

White retriever: Oh, I see. I'm sorry to hear that. I can understand that it can be very distressing. Did it happen here at the hospital, of all places?

The white dog tried to refrain from being too nosy, but she couldn't help her curiosity and eagerness to offer a listening ear overpowered the filters that she often checked with how her intentions came across.

Nicole: Eh, no. The person's recovering there now, though. I simply came here after my shift to attempt to show some compassion. I've been willing to make amends for a while now as well, but that sorta got thrown out the window based on recent developments.

The dog's eyes widened slightly for a single second as the feline revealed to her that she had come here after a shift, after a night full of working. It was no surprise that the feline's energy must have been tested as well then. She herself worked as a forensics lab scientist and partial CSI agent at the main Californian board of Elmore county, and her shifts usually depended on the crime scene timing or if there were cases of late-night lab work, but usually she wasn't put on parole during the night, which made her ever so used to day-work and raised her respect for those working night shifts.

White retriever: Night shift? You must be exhausted then. I'm sorry to hear your efforts to solve the dispute turned out this way, though it's admirable that you made the time to go right away after clocking out. I don't mean to make any assumptions about your situations, but maybe this person wasn't worth your time if you

attempted compassion these times.

Nicole: Heh, it's sweet of you to say that. Unfortunately, it's a little more complicated, but you're right in the sense that I should try not to dwell too much on it. I tried my best, but my energy is probably better spent on getting out of here and crashing into bed.

White retriever: That's super valid. People who work night shifts impress me, not gonna lie.

Nicole: Really? Don't put me on a pedestal, though. I usually work day shifts, but the night spots open when there's extra manpower needed for the international wing of sales, and I take them on temporarily sometimes. It's just an office job, you see.

White retriever: Ah, well, I'm not subtracting from finding it impressive regardless. A change of work times like that sounds just as tough, even if it's an office job. I'm mostly a lab worker, and you cannot keep me captured behind a desk forty hours a week.

Nicole: A lab, you say? What sector, if you don't mind my curiosity? Don't tell me you're a scientific worker who's looking up to a desk jockey like me.

White retriever: Forensics. Also, I personally think any job has its medal-worthiness. Any working force is partaking in society and its running economic system, so that should be appreciated regardless.

The blue feline couldn't help but chuckle a little bit, starting to forget about the distressing feelings from the situation with Brandon at this point. The canine's soft and sweet, yet slightly naive tone amused her a little. But not in a bad way, she simply thought it was charming, and it was true that the young woman's optimism cheered her up.

White retriever: What's funny? Did I say something wrong?

Nicole: No, no. Don't worry about it. I just think you are such a sweetheart. Though thank you for helping me cheer up a bit, I really appreciate it.

White retriever: It's no problem. I'm always happy to reach out to

others, even if a small gesture can help them out a little.

Nicole cracked a polite smile and reached for her phone in the pocket of her skirt to check the time. Noticing it was later in the morning, her tiredness began to tug at her eyelids once again after their exchange. She then reached out her paw, remembering her etiquette of manners, and grinned.

Nicole: I haven't made the effort yet to introduce myself, I realized. How rude of me.

The dog respectfully shook her paw as her expression briefly brightened, feeling like the gesture was done in further appreciation, and she couldn't be any more glad to see the cat seemed in a visibly better mood now.

Nicole: My name's Nicole, I'm from around town here, even though you won't find me near this area of the hospital a lot.

White retriever: Well, pleasure to meet ya. And same here, I don't live far away from the block of Elmore Boulevard. I'm Kayla.

Nicole: I wanted to once again thank you for your kind words. It felt impolite not to at least know the name of the lady who was nice enough to reach out.

Kayla: Don't mention it. I hope the rest of the day will carry you well now.

Nicole: It'll be alright, thanks. I wish I could stick by for longer, but I both am in desperate need of some shut-eye and don't wanna take up any more of your time either.

Kayla: Oh, it's totally fine, don't worry. Catch you later if I happen to run into you again?

Nicole: Yeah, I wouldn't mind. It's nice to know there are still kind strangers out there who can make a difference.

Kayla nodded with a broad smile on her snout, and her tail aided her expression by wagging slowly for a few seconds. The feline fished in her pocket for her car keys and began to walk past the

retriever while briefly waving her paw, as the dog did the same gesture before heading towards the hospital. At the same time Kayla entered through the doors of the hospital, Nicole drove off to head home.

The white canine couldn't shake her curiosity about what had happened to her friend as soon as he had messaged her about his hospitalization. He wasn't entirely the type to get in reckless accidents and had rarely ever been to the hospital overall, which made Kayla feel both worried and surprised at the same time. It was important to her to show her support in person and could only hope the surgery he had to get went smoothly. She had known him since their high school years and got along fairly well as their acquaintance became more of a friendship before their graduation. Their respective class performances were quite good, which often got them perceived as rather nerdy, but it did end up with them having lots of open doors with potential and success for their futures. She always had an interest in studying for any science-related sector, even way before she discovered forensic work interested her the most, especially after finding out she had a keen eye for chemical research and helping with cracking cases. He was more of a numbercruncher, as he used to be very passionate about starting a corporate business of his own, but quickly realized the stakes on the market remained high and eventually decided to settle for an employed position in accountancy or sales for the time being. They eventually had to part their ways during college, as her forensic science campus was outside of town and a hassle to travel to Elmore from, which he himself never left. After both of them got their degree, he in financial economics, they had the chance to meet up on occasion again, as Kayla moved back to town to live together with her boyfriend, now turned husband, Jay. But no matter how well she knew the guy during their school years, once she began to catch up with him during their twenties, she had observed that he had changed a lot as a person. From his former, silent and passive nature, to now a slightly more bold and opinionated demeanor. He didn't specifically turn for the worse, but Kayla never really changed much from the nerdiness she had had since childhood, and it was something to get used to, as it seemed he had entirely grown out of it. Especially now that she knew he kept settling for lower wage cubicle jobs and still didn't seem to follow his starting

business dream yet. The white dog got herself out of her thoughts and entered the hospital room where he resided after checking in at the secretary's desk. She tried not to show too much overt concern on her face upon seeing his left eye bandaged up. His eyes slightly narrowed as his mouth widened into a smile once he saw her walking in and reached his arms out to the side, in an attempt at comedic posing.

Brandon: You'll never guess what happened to me, Kay.

It had been a while since Kayla had met up with him, as work had kept her quite busy these months, and it had tested her energy. Even though today was a day for herself and her errands, she prioritized contact with friends in her life as much as she was able to. Brandon looked rough in this state, and she felt a slight ache of pity for him. She saw two deep slashes peeking from underneath his bandages that went down the upper part of his cheek, not even needing to doubt the fact that his injury seemed to be clearly animalistic. The dog sat down on the chair that was next to his bed and faced him to allow the room to open for conversation.

Kayla: It looks serious, man. Please do tell.

Chapter 11 - Devil's Advocate

It was the Thursday after when Brandon was set to return to his shift, after a thin week of recovering from his surgery at the hospital, and partially at home. His gashes luckily didn't need any thorough stitching, and most of his facial tissue around the area was able to recover well. The wounds were closed with surgical glue and scabbed enough to the point that they no longer needed bandaging. Unfortunately, the same kind of positive recovery couldn't be stated about his left eye, though, as it had already been evident that it was permanently blinded, and the eye itself remained sensitive, as he would need to keep wearing a patch for protection for the time being. Instead of replacing it with a glass eye, which would've been the first treatment in line, a big part of it was still unscathed, and it was mainly the lens itself that had been damaged, so he had opted to get it surgically stabilized, and the color ended up becoming drained from the dark iris, as well as his pupil ending up with a white-ish fog. His eyepatch brought Brandon an uncomfortable feeling of humiliation, and it would continue to haunt him with the burning craving for justification and revenge he couldn't seem to ignore, as his now monocular vision would become the constant reminder of that. He couldn't tell how he felt about going back to work, the moment he had his car keys in hand, ready to head out the door, as he silently stood in the hallway of his apartment. Deep down, he couldn't deny Nicole was right when she told him he wasn't likely going to keep his job any longer, for the evidence of what happened at the staircase was clear, and the fact that he, as a new employee, simply couldn't compete with her, who had provided her services for at least four years. Since the founding of the company itself, at that too. He felt frustrated for having allowed himself to spiral out of complete control the way he did. His hatred remained strong towards her, but a small, more rational version of himself knew that he had made the situation escalate as quickly as it had. But was she right for having clawed him in the face? He absolutely didn't believe so, as he utterly despised the way she talked about her own feline antics to him, as he thought she clearly had attempted to excuse her behavior with it, and he

struggled to properly understand it. Nicole was a creature he simply couldn't read well, especially compared to others who *were of different species*. He hated cats and never wanted to have anything to do with them. It was a big reason why it was hard for him to face her; he couldn't seem to escape the immediate disgust that would well up inside him at her sight. He even wondered if he wouldn't have this problem if she were any other being. At this point, that train of thought felt out of the question, given how strongly he had woven their rivalry. At least, he felt like it was a rivalry. He knew Nicole tried everything in her might to step away from the situation, but he simply couldn't allow her to. Especially not right now, not anymore. Regardless of whether he'd get fired or not, he needed her to pay for what she had done.

Brandon had opted in for the day shift as well now, despite his strong liking for the nightly hours he was introduced to during the first month of his employment at the Factory. But he knew it was necessary not to put too much strain on his eye that still had to adapt to the vision it had to do on its own, and daylight would simply be the better option. He didn't mind it too much, as the majority of his past jobs had been during the day anyway, and it was something he adapted easily to. But it didn't sit well with him that Nicole had returned to the day shift as well, due to the fact that her nighttime position was temporary, and he wished he didn't need to face her at work anymore. He didn't care any less about encountering her outside the office, but now he knew he would remain stuck around her here too. The only positive he could find in his favor was simply the fact that Yoshida had given the collaboration position with Nicole to another employee, both due to the conflict that had gone down and his recovery. From a few other coworkers, he had heard the company was catching up well with the overdues so far, but some employees were still being selected for overtime and night shift positions until the early fall rush was dealt with. It was near the halfway point of September, and as schools as well as courses had begun again, a lot of bulk orders had been made for paperware, school supplies, and craft materials. The Rainbow Factory was the largest supplier of anything related to education, office, and craft products, with a primary focus on color, such as markers, pens, paints, pencils, colored paper, and more. A large spectrum of colors could be artificially manufactured with

ease and low budget instead of having to buy in naturally sourced pigments or other costly alternatives, which meant that the company could offer way more options and a broad assortment of expertise without the limitations of pricey pigments. The Yoshidas prided themselves on their knowledge and accessibility to the natural science of rainbows and the spectrums of such that gave the company a head start on these efficient shortcuts without it costing the quality of the products, mostly thanks to the family's heritage from ancient weather deities, and it had left Mr. Yoshida with a breakthrough of a business startup in a town that was so full of color and magic. Besides, the fact that the Factory had expanded massively and rapidly in the past years, not long after it had started up, proved enough for it to have a large clientele. From schools to other businesses and from small art clubs to large store chains, there were a lot of options for clients and accounts, no matter the size of their business.

It had been two hours into Brandon's shift when Yoshida had made his way back into the main office after a meeting, and immediately had approached the orange humanoid to request a sit-down with him. He entered his boss's office with him and sat down at the desk, facing each other. Brandon could tell from Yoshida's face that the cloud humanoid clearly struggled with figuring out how to start. He saw how he took a notepad out and the way his hand hovered slowly above the page for a few seconds before writing a few things down was enough of an indicator of the hot water he was in. Brandon mentally braced himself, but didn't necessarily feel too hesitant to speak up after the sound of Yoshida's pen scratching over the surface of the paper ruled the room for a moment.

Brandon: I know exactly what this is about, sir. I messed up, and I do not want to waste your time making excuses.

Yoshida: Good, because we do have quite a predicament laid out in front of us. I hope you're aware that, in most circumstances, immediate termination comes without question as a consequence of aggravated assault towards another coworker.

Brandon nodded with a blank expression. As Yoshida finished his sentence, the orange humanoid hadn't broken eye contact for a single second since they had started speaking, and the thorough

stare from his one uncovered eye seemed to aid in his attempt at making his boss remember the returning damage he had already received from it. He knew his attack with the fire extinguisher had been close enough to putting Nicole in mortal danger, but he couldn't care less about her right now, nor allowed his thoughts to even wander towards her direction.

Yoshida: But, as the big elephant in the room, it's also clear that the event didn't result in a one-sided case of violence. I do sincerely hope your recovery is going smoothly, and I want to lay it out on the table in a crystal clear manner that the unique nature of the event has made me think through your function here. We do still need all the manpower we can get to finally round up the last phase of the order rush, so there's a proposition I'm willing to make, Scotths.

Brandon: Oh... really? I mean, I'm all ears. I honestly expected you to sit me down for a hearing about the situation at first, but I understand if there isn't much more to add to what of her side my coworker has shared already.

Yoshida: Don't start cheering yet. There are still a few matters of consideration being discussed with the board of managers, but we're willing to give you a single chance to show your driven performance once again, without getting distracted by personal disputes. Your skillsets are impressive enough for us to have hired you as rapidly as we did, but we prefer to see that part of you more instead of letting the personal matters you have going on seep into your comportment on the office floor.

Brandon: I promise I won't let you down. I know there's nothing much I can say to get my eagerness to improve through without ending up sounding too hollow, but I'm willing to do anything to make a change.

Yoshida: Good to hear. This means your position will temporarily be constricted to just accounting for the time being, so that we still can have your hands on board with turning the numbers upright, but it does mean your salary will have a mild reduction during then. Though you'll be working from a different office wing in the building, to allow for a new, fresh start in another environment

with other colleagues. Once the current rush is taken care of and the order flow has stabilized, we'll speak again about the consideration of giving you back your original role.

Brandon listened eagerly to what his boss was offering. He couldn't really use a pay cut right now, but this outcome couldn't have been any more in his favor when it came to not getting fired, and it was the least he wanted. The Factory allowed him to work in an environment that was comfortable enough for him to keep a proper day-to-day structure, and he didn't mind most people around either. It had just been Nicole and his own personal business that had stirred uncertainty into his performance. But now he didn't even need to work on the same floor as her anymore, at least for now, and it was mostly that he felt glad about.

Brandon: Well, I can't say no to that, sir. I appreciate a second chance being given, and I agree to this offer.

Yoshida gave the young man a slow nod as his expression turned slightly less cold, before he rested his hands against each other on top of his desk in front of him.

Yoshida: Well, that's all I wanted to talk about, for now. Better get going again now, I suggest making use of lunch time to gather your belongings and move to the upper floor, where my main advisor will be ready to help you set up there.

Brandon got up from the chair and shook his boss's hand once he held it out for him, his expression briefly intensifying to show his more serious demeanor. He then made his way towards the door and spoke one last time while turning his head in Yoshida's direction, before heading out of the room.

Brandon: I'll repeat what I said, I won't let you down.

• • •

Brandon set his plate aside on the dish rack as soon as he had finished washing up and put the tupperware with his leftovers into the fridge. The evening felt rather slow-paced in its unfolding so far, and as it neared 8 PM, he sat down on his couch to turn on the TV

and tune in to today's news. His apartment was small, but not cramped, and it resided on the third floor with its own balcony. It wasn't too bad a place for housing just one person, as he lived entirely on his own. He had entered the dating field a while ago for a potential other half, but after the end of his most recent relationship earlier this year, he found himself uninterested for the time being. There was too much to focus on when it came to his business dreams he still wanted to work for, but the recent years had simply caught him slacking due to the bills for his expenses that couldn't be put on hold anytime soon. It was more comfortable aiming for job positions that were easier to get and easier to stay at, since his founding dream remained too risky for what it was worth to him. He'd figure it out later, someday, but for now he preferred to look day by day. The apartment was tidy and lacked some decoration, except for the few framed paintings that spread across the multiple walls of the entire living room and hallways. There wasn't anything too special overall, just white walls with dark wooden doors, cabinets, closets, and very old-fashioned looking gold colored door handles. Most of the remaining furniture was either white or brown as well, the thin curtains with their light gray-blue shade being the only thing cutting through the very monotone palette of the interior design. Brandon was someone who didn't care too much about decor, as long as the colors went well enough together, and he absolutely didn't want anything to be distracting if he ever were to bring home some extra work to finish up in his space. He didn't have too much to spend either, so he usually preferred putting his money away for more useful goals.

Brandon was a type of humanoid that was considered fairly unique in the world of various creatures and species that lived amongst each other. While there wasn't a direct name, his family was descended from an ancient species that branched out from goblins and wood elves. Most of their ancestors were people of nature, as their ways of living often had painted themselves as rather "magical," though nearly everything about this was lost to time and evolution, whereas their species in the modern world no longer needed to live in their ancient ways or use the rituals they prided themselves on. They evolved to live as mere humans, like how most of the other species ended up. His bloodline specifically was a family of caregivers and supporting shoulders, their love for nature

remaining as the main trait that connected them to their ancestry. The majority of its members either worked or had worked in healthcare, for fundraising companies, or in the animal world. His father was the more specific individual Brandon had always looked up to. Wayne Scotths was a prominent figure, especially in the world of wildlife conservation and rescue, having shown his face on a TV nature documentary a small number of times. That eventually turned into his legacy and main aspect of remembrance once he had passed. The loss of his father wouldn't ever stop stinging Brandon's heart, as the two were close, and his mother hadn't been the same either after, having brought difficulty into the time of growing up for him and his older brother Ryan. Even though they ended up in a fine and stable living situation upon having entered adulthood, it would remain a difficult weight to carry for both of them as time went on.

Once the TV no longer piqued his interest, his attention was drawn to his phone as he checked if he had gotten a reply from Kayla to his latest message yet. Earlier, when he had just come home after his shift, he had caught her at the right time between her work to exchange some conversation. Back at the hospital, he had told her everything, not having bothered to save face for Nicole's part in the ordeal. He knew his friend trusted him and that she was always willing to do anything to support him as well as make him feel reassured. Even if they hadn't necessarily spoken all that often in recent years, they still got on pretty well. Kayla simply couldn't believe what she heard. And all that for the uncomfortable coincidence she had encountered Nicole in the parking lot right before she had gone inside the hospital. It felt so strange, as if the dog drastically missed the signals the feline would've given off. As if she completely misread her and her true intentions. *Right?* Kayla couldn't deny that she did have a tiniest bit of doubt upon hearing about the event, but that could've simply been her disbelief at what this feline was capable of instead. Furthermore, Brandon was her friend, and Nicole was a mere stranger; he would always rely on her, right?

Their conversation now was partially a further discussion of what had happened, and having heard from Kayla that she had run into the cat before her visit, Brandon's curiosity had increased. It

recently came to his mind to ask Kayla to help out with setting the record straight with Nicole, hoping he would be able to get near and start a conversation with the feline without being immediately shut down. The white retriever did give her own slice to Brandon of not wanting to be too involved in the situation she didn't feel like she was any part of, which he understood, but at the same time, he couldn't deny he was too hesitant to make any moves by himself. *He had to convince her by expressing how scared he felt.* Besides, it wouldn't be a complete lie either, as he did actually feel a large shred of fear, his own instincts trying to protect him after the physical damage the cat had caused, and feeling afraid of none other than the gleam in her eyes he had witnessed during her meltdown at the staircase. It was disturbing when he realized he was able to recognize the specific look and color of them in that state from somewhere, but it puzzled him what it could actually mean. But what he did know was that his father used to be an expert on felines and their ancient history. Millions of years of evolution had allowed for a divide between the feral and the anthro of mammalian species, but their first line of ancestors remained to come from the same origins. His father had done a fair share of research about it during his time working in the *Panthera Tigris* enclosures, having accessed centuries-old sources but never really having gotten the chance to flesh out his findings, as he passed away after only a year of work in that specified sector. But there was still a notebook, which Brandon had kept to honour his legacy, and he suspected he had recognized Nicole's freakish eyes from an old scripture his father had referenced in one of the pages. There wasn't enough concrete or clear evidence to determine if his theory would even make any sense, even to himself, but he knew that if he were to attempt finding a weak spot on the feline, that would be a good area to start. But first, it was time to ask Kayla for a little favor.

Chapter 12 - The art of confrontation

Nicole was awfully surprised at the practical invite Kayla had sent her earlier that Friday morning, having managed to reach her via her Elmore Plus profile, and having sent a message with the question of whether she felt up for it to hang out later that evening after work, before their weekends would start. She mentioned the opening of a new downtown art gallery near the block of Elmore Boulevard, and it would hold its first celebratory exposition that was free for any interested individuals to visit. It had been a few days since the feline had run into the white retriever for the first time at the hospital's parking lot, where they had gotten off on the right foot pretty much from the first few words they exchanged. Kayla was sweet and cheerful, and Nicole found her to have a comforting presence as well. It was very kind of her to have immediately approached to give a hand when the feline was overtly not doing alright in her tangle of emotions and stressful breakdown that day. No matter how sweet she found it, Nicole was still surprised to wake up to a request from her to meet up, even if they barely knew each other. There was no harm in it, really; it would be a chance to potentially become friends of sorts, even if it puzzled Nicole why Kayla would be interested in hanging out with a woman from a whole different generation than hers. She wasn't even sure if the dog had anything of interest in common with her, but she knew those questions were better saved for when they were going to chat with one another. The feline simply couldn't help but feel a tiny bit awkward about it, just on her part, though; Kayla had a great demeanor, but she simply couldn't figure out what she could even expect. Anyhow, Nicole decided to give it a chance and replied to her message that she'd gladly come along. It would be a nice moment of socialization before resting up from the week of shifts, so she didn't think there was anything to worry about.

It was the start of the evening, a little while after Nicole had dinner with her family and left the house to meet Kayla at the gallery she

had sent the details for. The Boulevard's area of Elmore was more occupied by businesses and establishments than by residences, the main pillar for tourism of the town, if it ever had any outsider visitors. In other words, it was a busy but well-kept area of town, and if anyone had the chance of renting or purchasing a home there, they were considered quite well off. A long row of stores and office buildings stretched out next to the main street of the neighborhood, and it was the first turn into an alley Nicole needed to take to reach the gallery's studio. It didn't take long for a walk before she was able to spot the open doors of the white building with oak wood decorative framing, which had its doors wide open with signs pointing out its first exposition. Kayla was already waiting near the entrance for Nicole's arrival, who passively leaned against the wall whilst scrolling on her phone in a bit of a disengaged manner. The white dog felt a little bit conflicted inside still by what Brandon had told her about their dispute. He was the one who had suggested that she get closer to Nicole in the hopes of being able to properly talk things through with her and have it be easier to keep their own biases out of the situation. At least, that's what he had convinced her of, with his expression throughout their talk having shown that he was dealing with a lot of fear. Regardless of the part he would play in the event, the dog was able to see the fright that was clearly struck in him, as in her eyes would be logical for anyone after receiving such raw, physical, and ugly damage. For the meetup that Kayla requested from Nicole, it was based on a part of her that was extremely curious about getting to know the feline more properly to get her questions answered, but also her willingness to support Brandon in potentially helping with solving what he wanted to be solved. There was no malice in anything, at least, again, not from what she caught from his intentions, but even despite all that, it felt a bit nerve-racking to reach out to a practical stranger who had hurt her friend. If anything, she hoped to be able to diffuse the situation a little, if possible, and otherwise, it felt good enough to just give the feline another chance to show her true intentions.

The blue feline stuck her paw up at the height of her chest to give a brief, shy wave in Kayla's direction, who had just put her phone away. The dog's tail wagged a few times at the sight of Nicole having shown up, even if she didn't really know a reason why the

cat wouldn't after agreeing to come. Her demeanor was calm and reserved, a little different from the cheerfulness she had expressed more during their first meeting, but she kept her occasional feelings of unease hidden with all her might while trying to put the whole dispute with Brandon out of her head for a moment. This was gonna be about just getting to know Nicole a little better, as unbiased as she could be. Kayla wore a dim cyan linen blouse with white leggings underneath and black high-heeled ankle boots, carrying a beige tote bag on her shoulder with a dark green linoleum print of leaves, where she had just stored her phone, indicating she clearly enjoyed the creative and artful world. She took a few steps into the feline's direction as she waited for her to approach her fully, the smile on her snout broadening a bit as she stood in front of her.

Nicole: Hey, stranger, it's sweet you wanted to meet up again.

The feline chuckled softly after her sentence and made eye contact with the canine who stood in front of her. Kayla responded with a nod and turned before they began walking next to each other towards the entrance of the gallery.

Kayla: It's no biggie. I honestly didn't really have anyone else to ask to come along. Not a lot of artsy people that I know, you see.

Nicole: Well, I honestly find it kinda endearing you're interested in it yourself as a rather sciency lab person. Unless that's wrong of me to assume, heh.

Kayla: Nah, I've heard that one before. But I promise you I'm much more than just a science nerd. Unfortunately heavily an art nerd as well, hahah. My foster family introduced me to the culture of the creative, you see, as most of them worked in studios of their own. Usually with paints or photography.

Nicole: I see, that's amazing though, I'm glad you were surrounded by creative individuals in your time growing up. Foster, I hear?

Kayla: Yeah, I spent most of my childhood with them, as it took a little while before a good fit was found to adopt me. Even though those were my very early childhood years, I cherish everything

they've given me to discover my aspirations as a person. My adoptive family now gave me the same amount of space, but they weren't as enthusiastic as my fosters were. Unfortunately, I don't have much contact with my foster family anymore either.

The two briefly paused their chatter as they were handed a flyer each by the hostess at the entrance of the gallery before they entered, and they began their slow approach towards the coffee bar to get something to drink first. The lighting inside felt cozy and warm, bright enough to see clearly but easy on the eyes. A few framed paintings hung on the walls of this small corner that was made into a mini cafe of sorts, where guests could sit down to take a break or get something to drink during their visit. As the cat and dog sat down on the stools in front of the bar, they made an order for two lattes and continued their conversation while they waited.

Nicole: What you were saying, that's incredibly sweet, and I'm glad your fosters managed to give you something so meaningful growing up. Although this gallery, I just... can't help feeling surprised you still invited *me*? Over anyone else, I mean, even if you said you didn't have many other options.

Kayla: I got curious, to be honest. You were quite an admirable individual to run into that other time, and even if we turn out to have entirely different interests or no clicking whatsoever, I wouldn't ever want to force you to be friends with me or something.

Nicole: Well, I appreciate it a lot. It doesn't hurt to try making new friends sometimes, but as you said, I'm also not taking it personally if you just wanna turn around. At least it helps that I like art as well, y'know. It's been a while since I visited an actual exposition such as this. College, maybe even high school. A long while for sure.

Kayla: Oh, really? Did you go to art school?

Nicole could tell from Kayla's brightening expression that her interest was piqued by the fact that she had revealed herself to be keen on the creative world as well. Unfortunately, she knew that she had to disappoint from the potential cool ideas the dog could've been getting from that being untrue. Nicole never had the chance to

become an artist or even set foot in the creative industry.

Nicole: No, I wish. Art had always been something that spoke to me a lot, but in the way I was brought up, there was simply no time or space for anything of the sort, as it was portrayed as a waste of time and a "useless endeavor" in my family.

Kayla sulked a little bit upon hearing that, being rather familiar with the concept of ambitious individuals having their creative dreams turned down. She herself did have a family who would've been supportive of her if she ever wanted to go down the artistic route, but ended up falling in love with science first instead and had settled for that ever since. Not that she minded, but a lot of her childhood friends she had seen being criticized and disallowed to follow the creative career paths they themselves had their hearts in. The barista had served up their coffees at this point.

Kayla: Ahw, that sucks. I suppose you were left with nothing but your free time to create or something.

Nicole: Yeah, I mean, I drew a lot as a kid, and that never really changed until I became an adult. Lack of time and such. Though I didn't necessarily have "free time" for it back in the day, since my schedules were always planned for me and I had an after-school club nearly every weekday. My parents mostly cared about achievements and success, but from the perspective of what they considered "successful" or "a real job." I ended up not really caring enough about my grades at some point, just because I wanted to dive back into my sketchbook.

Kayla: Sorry to hear that. That must've been tough. Even though I went for the lab route, I'm grateful I was at least allowed to pick what I aspired to do.

Nicole sighed with modesty as she took the latte spoon and slowly stirred it into the glass, mixing the layer of foam ever so slightly with the rest of the coffee, as an aimless fidget while she gathered her thoughts.

Nicole: Eh, it's alright. I ended up with a sweet family of a husband and three kids that I wouldn't ever trade for the world, and that's all

that really matters to me. Art life might not even be it for me, and I have closure for that. But enough about my sad, failed art story, let's talk gallery. What's this exposition gonna entail?

Kayla gave a few nods as a response to what Nicole was sharing, respectfully taking in the information and not asking further as the feline clearly wanted to move to the next topic. As they drank their coffees, the canine elaborated a little on the theme of the exposition and what made her interested in the new gallery, drifting their conversation more towards cozy small talk but with slightly more depth to it occasionally. The rest of their meetup remained very relaxed, and as time went on a little, Kayla began to question herself on whether it was even fair to have any judgment on who Nicole truly was based on Brandon's perspective alone. She still didn't want to pry or involve herself in anything directly, but she did start to wonder if he had potentially exaggerated his side of the story a bit. Nicole was such a calm, reserved, and rather tired being. She could tell from the personal information she was comfortable enough to share that her motherhood was a very prominent aspect of her life she selflessly sacrificed for, her family being deeply cared for, and that she possessed a strongly protective energy that prioritized keeping them safe at all times. There wasn't anything that she gave off at all that could potentially steer Kayla in the direction of believing this woman was capable of such violence. If anything, the dog found the more rational approach was that it most likely had been a two-sided fight, and Nicole's side would be worth hearing out as well. Despite the slightly uneasy feelings she felt at the beginning of their meetup, she now felt entirely at ease and even considered keeping in touch with the feline for clicking on that amicable level. It started getting late eventually, and the feline and canine made their way to the exit of the gallery after a cozy evening spent mostly on talking and staring at a few paintings. Checking if she had gotten any new texts from her husband, who was going to pick her up, Kayla pulled out her phone for a second and took less than half a minute to respond to his confirmation of being near. Nicole looked up at the sky and saw it had gotten fully dark during the time they were inside, the open dark blue with minimal clouds showcasing its modest set of stars. Despite summer having gotten to its end and fall being nearly fresh, the temperature was still nice enough not to need a jacket, and the soft breezes

weren't becoming harsh yet.

Kayla: My hubby is on his way to bring me home. You got anyone waiting on, or did you drive here by yourself?

They began walking down the alley, towards the main road where the yellow family wagon was parked on the side. The feline pointed at it sideways as they neared.

Nicole: Just me and the trusty old junkwagon, but it'll get me home in the blink of an eye.

Kayla: Alrighty. Well, I had a good time, it was pretty nice getting to know ya a bit. Even though we talked more than we went around the exposition, I enjoyed it a lot.

Nicole: Same to you. Feel free to reach out at any time. I gave you my number earlier, but it's all chill to take your time.

Kayla nodded with a broad smile on her snout, and it didn't take longer than a few minutes until Jay appeared behind them on his motorcycle to pick up his wife. He let his feet hit the asphalt below his bike as he braked, taking off his helmet to reveal his short, shiny dark brown fur coat with darkened markings accentuating it. He was a Malinois with a slim build for the majority, except for his rather broad shoulders and capable arms, and his plain black shirt and light gray skinny jeans brought out his figure with ease. A slightly abstract line tattoo spread across his right upper arm with plant-like motives as it blended perfectly into the texture of his fur, and he wore two silver earrings on each of his sharply pointed ears and two round snakebite piercings that brought out his stoic outer image more. Cherry on top of the cake, his blue and amber heterochromatic eyes were vibrant despite the dimmer lighting of the streetlights in the dark. The retriever turned around as soon as she heard the hum of the motor behind her, and both she and Nicole waved at him. The short-lived interaction that followed had Jay briefly introduce himself to the feline before Kayla mounted onto his bike behind him, whilst putting on the secondary helmet he handed to her. He was rather soft spoken and polite in a way that was nearly unexpected from his looks if going off of stereotypes, and he threw in one last inviting note that he found it

nice to meet her. Kayla shared one last comment of appreciation for the time Nicole had taken to meet up with her before the feline and two canines waved their goodbyes, and Jay twisted the acceleration to take off.

It was close to midnight when she stood alone on the side of the street again. The soft beams from the streetlights sharpened her shadow as her eyes traveled from the buildings around her towards a taller apartment complex, resting on an industrial clock that showed the time. It wasn't too late for her usual, especially not for a weekend evening, but the near constant interactions of talking the past hours had eaten away at her social battery, and there wasn't much else she needed but to just curl up on the couch with a book or TV show. A yawn escaped her before she fished for the car keys in her purse and was about to open the door, until a strange sense traveling down her spine made her hesitate. Oddly enough, she felt like she wasn't alone on the street anymore. Turning her head slowly, her ears perked up as far as they possibly could, turning to each side with twitches in an attempt at scanning for any presence in her direct surroundings. The itching of her whiskers felt like a disadvantage on her ability to focus properly, as it annoyed her more than her own feeling of unease could. But it didn't stop her from picking up the sound of a few distant footsteps on the gravel ground near the photography studio that was at the other side of the block. Her hearing never failed her, as it confirmed to her it wasn't just paranoia and she actually had company, and could tell by the cautiousness of the steps that whoever they might've belonged to, didn't want her to catch them. Besides fellow visitors of the art exposition making their way home, Nicole couldn't think of any other reason for anyone to be out at this hour around this dark and quiet part of town. Unless it was no good, which her instincts already tried to warn her about. She turned around to face the streetlight next to the car again and pondered. She didn't really have any reason to be scared, being used to being out at night late and all, let alone her ability to strongly defend herself if ever needed. But it was the pure uncertainty and worrying about her newly disturbed physical state that had worn down her confidence. Unfortunately, it didn't take more than a single thought for her to start worrying extensively about it again, her thoughts trailing off a little while losing the focus on her surroundings she just had.

Increasing her own feeling of vulnerability at that moment, the footsteps in the gravel path had stopped, but before she even realized, the street lamp above her was smashed in with a rock that was thrown her way, engulfing her direct circle with darkness as she let out a slightly pathetic gasp.

Nicole: What the-?!

She turned around once again in a panicked and rapid motion, her eyes darting around for two seconds before she was met with the awful surprise of a familiar face standing in front of her, fidgeting with another rock in his hand that he had picked up. The dim orange shade of his skin was barely visible in the source of light he had just minimized, and his infuriated expression painted nothing but hostility with the way he held the stone like a weapon. Compared to the last time she had actually seen him, in the hospital, his claw marks were healing slowly but moderately well as they peeked a little underneath his eyepatch. His hair was fixed, dressed neatly, and all that, but the exhausted glare in his eye proved it wasn't the first night he was out late.

Nicole: The hell's your problem?! What are you even doing here, Brandon?

Brandon: Setting some scores straight. I didn't really get a fair match in this competition of violence, so if you wanna be a fair winner, you'd best give me 'nother chance, right?

Nicole: What are you even talking about? *Competition?*

Brandon: I've been getting to know you a little more lately, cat. Found some records the other day of big leagues you pulled off in sports clubs and martial arts during your time growing up. I wasn't surprised to find out you were chucked into this world as a competitive tryhard since day one. Crazy how easy they make it to find on the internet sometimes.

The feline's expression contorted to unease as her tail entirely straightened itself out, hanging completely still behind her legs.

Nicole: Why were you looking me up on the internet, creepy much?

Shit's old and irrelevant information anyway, and I thought you needed to recover at home?

Brandon: I started working again yesterday, but of course, you wouldn't know since I got blessed by being put on another floor, away from you. I don't give a fuck about your achievements, but it did get me to find out *you're a Senicourt.*

He tensed his arm and prepared to throw the second rock he was still holding in his hand. Rapidly in reflex, Nicole took a duck forward, landing on her paws and away from the range he threw it in. Instead of her head, it hit the metal of the same streetlight with the destroyed bulb and created an unpleasant, harsh metallic sound before it fell to the concrete. The feline bared her teeth as her ears flattened in immediate response to his assault.

Nicole: The face, seriously?! You're just gonna show up to throw stones at me like a madman?!

Brandon: Oh, I'm sorry for being no better than the clearly rational and harmless expressions of anger you so clearly have when things don't go your way. I'm upset because Kayla couldn't stall you for a minute longer, so we had the room to talk things out with her navigation.

Nicole got back onto her feet and backed off a few steps to remain wary.

Nicole: You threw away the chance to talk stuff out at the hospital. Why should I give you any other chance to reach me anymore?! And... Is Kayla involved...? How did you-

Brandon: Kayla's a friend of mine. I asked her for some help with this little situation, but I clearly should've taken the hint when she said she wanted to stay out of it.

The feline struggled to believe Kayla was affiliated with Brandon out of all people, but it now made a little more sense to her why she had invited her to the exposition. Had it been nothing but a ploy this time? Or was the dog genuinely willing to get to know her a bit? Did she at least manage to show her a little more about herself

to prove the situation was two-sided? It was a bit hard to tell since the event was never brought up in any of their conversations.

Nicole: I don't think there's any bit of talking you were willing to do anyway, judging by the way you're trying to injure me. I don't want to have the same conversation again, as I'm tired of trying to reason with you.

Brandon: Maybe you got me there. But I'm also not here to say the same words over and over again; if anything, I wanna make you shut up this time.

He revealed one more stone he had kept in his pocket and prepared to throw it once again. That similar, unsafe feeling of getting cornered began to well up inside the cat, similarly to at the staircase. The fur on her back started rising as she took slow, small steps backwards and towards the hedges next to the sidewalk, seeking any type of cover or escape.

Brandon: October seventy-three, thirty-nine years old, the blossomed modern spirit of the Senicourt bloodline that has a lot to prove, judged by their history.

It was disturbing how much personal information he began to prove he knew from records and sources that wouldn't matter much to anyone else, the way it did to him. It started becoming nearly terrifying when he started mentioning a few aspects that even Nicole herself did not know about her own family.

Nicole: History? What are you talking about? There's nothing wrong with my family?!

Brandon: You clearly don't know, do you? Anything else they could've been keeping from you?

His grip on the stone loosened for a moment as he increased the speed of his steps, as he crept closer to her, before tightening it again and raising his arm for another strike.

Brandon: Maybe the fact that a lot of your ancestors were separated and shamed for the genes they possessed, the way no

other feline bloodline was as corrupt as yours!

It was difficult to focus on the information he was telling at the same time as trying to predict his next moves or dodge another strike he wanted to do. As the third stone left his hand, the feline tensed her legs at lightning speed to jump right out of the way of where it hit the concrete. Nicole leaped so high that she was able to reach far above him and landed on all fours behind him before he was able to turn around rapidly as well.

Nicole: Cut it out! You're not gonna solve anything by trying your eye-for-an-eye methods for what happened to you. It's your receipt for trying to kill me, and making up stories about my family in the hopes of justification, ain't gonna fix it!

Brandon: I would've loved it for you if those were stories that I am trying to tell. My father was an expert in *Felidae* history, you see, and everything that comes together at the very beginning proves everything I need to know. No matter how much you preach being so different from your feral peers, you cannot deny the millions of years of evolution that started from the same source, cat.

Nicole: I know about my own species evolutionary history, thank you very much. I just don't see the purpose of trying to prove something to me about my family! I am my own person, and anything you're trying to reach for regarding what I did to you is on me.

Brandon: What about your *supernatural eyes?* It's far beyond just your actions that had me curious about you, and remember what I said, I will find you out.

There were those words again, in a similar way as how he had hinted at the unusual nature of her eyes having changed color before, he brought it up again, knowingly of the fact she did not want to answer to it, or didn't have an answer in the first place. A low growl trembled in her throat as her spiral of worrying about it now turned into a full-on nerve he had struck, and she stopped backing away from his approaching steps as deeper anger showed itself on her face, clear as day. It was like a nonverbal warning he couldn't deny he needed to comply with, as he froze and the tension

in his body turned from imposing to defensive, feeling like their roles slowly started to shift. The feline straightened her back after having gotten back onto her feet, even less intimidated now that she noticed he had no more stones to throw. The claws on her paws unwillingly showed themselves as she tensed them and counted the minimal seconds it took for her patience to disappear.

Nicole: You're an insane motherfucker, you know that? If you really want me to go along with the evil perpetrator image you want me to have so badly, or what you believe is the case for me, then, don't you think it's kind of a *foolish* move to provoke me every time? There will come a time when I won't be able to stop myself from following through on the warnings I'm trying to give you.

Brandon was caught in silence as he didn't expect her demeanor to entirely shift as dramatically as it did, and he couldn't figure out if this was what he had attempted to get out of her or if he had already seen it coming from miles away. His face had turned to surprise and caution at this point, and this time it was he who took a step back.

Nicole: You should know that by now, considering how it went down with your eye.

Her right eye twitched slightly when a new, uncomfortable surge of indignation began to morph into a form of wrath, realizing the position he had put her in and the exhaustion that was present from having to process the worrying nature of his threats. She started about having it. Though she did not want to hospitalize him another time, or in general, she knew there was something truly messing with her rationale, the more she tried to grasp the shift in emotion she began to feel just now.

Brandon: What are you gonna do now?! Flip the script to prove you're a hypocrite?!

Nicole: Hah! No, I just wanna make one single thing very clear, that I've gone as easy on you as I possibly could, and that I need you to finally... leave me the fuck ALONE!

There was no wind-up needed for the powerful kick she made into

his chest, making him drop to the ground backwards and pulling out the cards she knew he wanted her to play.

Nicole: Isn't this what you wanted? For your little "aha" moment?! I realized there aren't enough attempts I can make at finally making you treat me rationally, or prove that I'm not siding with violence at heart.

She paused as she stared deeply into his eye, waiting for any sign of fear to be drawn from him.

Nicole: But despite my *heart*, I cannot promise you if my *body* is willing enough to hold that violence back.

Brandon: Turns out you truly cannot beat the killer instinct out of a cat, can you? I knew you'd crack.

As a recipe for disaster, his return to the sensitivity of the topic of her species ended up being the last drop for the time being, until Nicole's attempt at an act no longer was an act. She absolutely did not want to go along with what her body was preparing her for, and it started to hurt to keep herself still. Her heart ached at the hurtful words he had been speaking, but his intimidating behavior of expressing harm he was planning to do had turned her primal instincts to self-protection. Her innards screamed at how he had proven to have become an actual threat now, even outside the event at the staircase. She was tired of cowering, but felt severely uncomfortable with the way she started no longer being able to keep a full sense of control by the seams, and it frightened her. For the first time in actual years, a very primal and uncalculated response began to brew in her vocal cords, as her lips pulled back in the exposure of her teeth and a low, labored *"mreooww"* emitted from her throat. The sound was haunting in the emptiness of the street, a singular light in a window turning on as it clearly woke someone up on one of the floors of the building nearby, unbeknownst to them. The more Nicole behaved like a cat, the more disturbance it brought into Brandon, as the dislike of felines that was wired into him was no facade, despite anything. Meanwhile, his heart raced, and his eyes widened in fear; uncannily enough, some chuckles escaped from the smile that appeared on his face. He couldn't deny he was absolutely horrified at the statue the

feline was in, especially by her unsheathed claws, being able to nearly recall the physical pain he had experienced from when she had slashed them through his face. But it was also part of what he needed to see from her to work out the theories he had been putting into his research lately. The last bit of rationality was dropped by the feline as she took another leap, right into his direction this time, and raised her clawed paw in the process. The humanoid gathered his thoughts in a millisecond once he saw her rapidly approaching, and ducked away to the side to avoid the daggers at her fingertips.

Brandon: Hell no, not again!

Nicole: FUCK YOU! I thought you wanted this!

Brandon: Oh, I just wanted your true colors, but I've seen more than enough!

She turned her upper body to look at him as he got himself off the ground, a hint of frenzy gushing from her widened eyes that proved there was no backing out for him this time. Her speed and swift motions were no match for the limitations his mere human anatomy allowed him, and she could tell he could no longer hide his fear. Why was he even stupid enough to ambush her in the first place, all alone at that, too? Her instincts responded from fear as well, but unlike him, she was no longer able to feel it right now. Not having the right thoughts to speak up again, her body instead urged her to strike another time, this time capturing him with success, and her claws hooked onto the tough fabric of his jacket. He had no choice but to search for an immediate way to escape her grip, as there was frankly nothing stopping her from actually biting into his vulnerable neck vessel like he had seen feral cats do to their prey. But she had no interest in turning him, or anyone at that, into prey as she simply wanted him to get the message and *fuck off* forever. There was enough humanity left in her to just give him consequences for her warnings, but not enough to prevent her from using brute force. It didn't take him long before he resorted to arming himself, as he pulled out a switchblade from the one pocket he was still able to reach. The sight of the knife was enough for Nicole to hear the imaginary alarm bells ringing inside her head, and she immediately locked her arm around his neck in an attempt to keep him from using it. But to no avail, the mildly tight grip her

arm muscle had on his throat wasn't enough to stop his arm from reaching up. He had the slight advantage of being a few inches taller than her, meaning his arm was long enough to reach her own neck, and he frantically began to attempt carving into her to make her let go. Her pupils constricted to thinner slits as it was a disturbing sight to see him overtly losing his mind, catching her off guard just enough to have him successfully nick her on the side of her neck with his blade. The brief, stinging agony of the cut was followed by a thin stream of blood pouring out, and despite not being too deep, the powerlessness she felt from it regardlessly overwhelmed her, and it had her voice choke up as she winced sharply for a second. The half minute this took was enough for Brandon to take control of the situation now, as he threatened her at knifepoint once she had let go of him. The two stood in front of each other, ragged up and out of breath as he tried to recover from the brief constriction of his breathing and she held her paw against the wound on her neck while trying to get her head right again. But unfortunately, their rather aimless fight was far from over. Nicole held out her paws in front of her as she saw the blood staining the one she had just touched her neck with, and it sent her into a secondary wave of frenzy, in a similar fashion as the previous, and she squeezed her eyes shut, but this time it was accompanied by a deep, distressing kind of agony she had so hoped was a one-off phenomenon. Her gums began to hurt, and the throbbing sensation of the veins near her eyes betrayed what was unveiling.

Chapter 13 - Hollow victory

As the metallic smell of her own blood began to rush into her nostrils more intensely than her sense of scent usually allowed, she felt this physical damage she had gotten from Brandon's knife brought out a level of vulnerability she hadn't really felt that deeply in herself before. It was as if something deep within her didn't allow her to get hurt, let alone by someone like him, or have the tiny cut he made be such a big deal the way it seemed now. The burning feeling in her gums didn't last long whatsoever, but it was enough to get a rise out of her as soon as she felt her fangs had ever so slightly increased their presence in her mouth by having grown a fraction of an inch the same way they had done that one night the week before. It was weird and unnerving to her, but the standoffish environment she and the humanoid had gotten themselves into made it difficult for her to dwell on her worries about the return of these features too much. She didn't have a lot of choice in it, as everything right now seemed to ignite nothing but panic in her, feeling the utter need to be at home. Her head was starting to get loud, so many thoughts and stirring emotions that overwhelmed her. Her hopes for the physical, seemingly supernatural contortions having been one-off were crushed as it was now clear she'd have to deal with them more. She grunted as a sharp headache inflamed her skull and couldn't shake the fact that her increased pain greatly intensified her emotions. Brandon was staring his eyes out as he caught a glimpse of the red smears of blood staining the rims of her slightly enlarged teeth, and his theory began to stir in his mind. His breath hitched as his uncovered eye was met by the deeply unnerving glare from the feline's eyes that opened the next second, revealing the orange-yellow glow he so remembered. Failing to think straight, Nicole did not hesitate a single second after locking eye contact with him and screamed out in a piercing tone that came close enough to an elongated shriek as she aimed her claws once again in a leap forward. She felt like the pain from her headache was taking a deeper toll on her entire physical system than she was used to, and a reddish blur seemed to mess up her vision, leaving her with nothing but aimless clawing in the last stream of frenzy

that kept running through her. Brandon ducked away on time, but absolutely did not want to miss out on the opportunity of collecting evidence he had so hoped for, so he fished his phone out of the pocket of his pants, putting in great efforts to snatch a picture of her face with the current state of her eyes, in the hopes it would come in handy later. But even though a picture managed to be taken by him, the sacrifice he ended up getting tied into was the way she now had successfully struck a punch into his chest that got him meeting the concrete once again. Her vision every once in a few seconds cleared up a little bit, but remained quite useless overall, and even her feline advantage on nightly vision couldn't help her, but it was enough to identify Brandon's facial expressions once she pinned him down and got close enough with her head. He held onto his phone as if his life depended on it, starting to become deeply unsure if he was truly gonna be able to make it out of here alive now, the reality of what he provoked out of her starting to set in. Her eyes began to pierce into his with the thorough glare she caught him in, as the orange luminescent pigments in her sclerae started to glow more intensely, and the yellow pupils sharpened themselves. She wasn't even half aware of what her current appearance was actually like or what she was doing, but tangible damage began to be visibly done as she saw how his pupil fogged up a little bit, and a few plucks of his black hair rapidly deteriorated to an aged gray. It was as if her stare protruded him with the way it was causing such stress on his body at a rapid speed that was too fast for his mind to comprehend, which made him unable to panic or move and kept him lying powerlessly on the ground with nothing but Nicole's own mercy to save him.

The light that was turned on in the building near them a few minutes ago had now long gone out again. It became evident that their brawl had caught the attention of an outsider to the situation, once an unsuspecting figure emerged from the building's exit at the bottom. There were mostly only industrial or business buildings around the alley, but a night shift or overnight stay regardlessly seemed to be the case for this individual. Once the figure got closer, a male voice could be heard shouting while questioning what was going on. The man's approach was already enough for Nicole to completely snap out of the frenzied state and violent demeanor she had gotten stuck in, removing herself from Brandon's direct circle

and getting up on her feet again. A fortunate coincidence worked its magic in her favor as her eyes and teeth seemed to have returned to entirely normal again, rapidly enough before she got up from the ground. The bystander turned out to be middle-aged but probably slightly older than her, as she quickly inspected the humanoid figure to see who had come into their presence. He looked as innocent as someone could look from a first impression, and most likely was disturbed by what went on. She didn't want any trouble and felt the guilt for having caused disturbance seep in, now that her mind seemed to gather its thoughts a little better again, and the air felt awfully quiet. The man's expression turned alarmed once he saw the feline's blood-stained neck, and barely any more words needed to be spoken to draw his conclusion once his eyes rested on the knife that Brandon had kept in his hand all this time, his phone in the other. Nicole glanced over at his figure for a moment and noticed the grayed plucks of hair he now had, and his deepened eye bags that showed his state somehow looked worse than before she had stared him down. But it left her quite unfazed for now; there were already so many odd things happening that night, and her sleepiness clutched her. Her patience was beyond dried up, and she just wanted to go home. She wanted to hit the hay and sleep through the entire weekend if needed. Her voice had gotten slightly hoarse from all the screaming during their fight, and she covered the bleeding nick with her paw, stepping aside a few feet. She wanted nothing more but rest and resolution, thinking hard about how the involvement of the bystander had gotten her back to her senses, saving what was left of Brandon's sanity and maybe even her own. Her talking was slow and labored as she tried her best to explain the most surface-level version of the situation to the man in the hopes of staying out of trouble, but no more effort was needed as he had seen what he needed to see. In good faith, he began to dial the emergency services on his phone to contact the police, whilst helping Nicole to save face with her wounded state, having seen enough proof in his eyes. The feline's eyelids felt heavier than ever, and her tiredness overpowered her enough to the point that her brain couldn't even properly process the events that had just gone down. Her vision blurred a little as she zoned out in her awaiting state, of her and the man keeping an eye on Brandon until the authorities arrived.

With the way Nicole felt surprised by her capability to drive home in her state of exhaustion, it was enough for her to conclude that this night had taken an awful toll on her. She felt absolutely spent after getting out of the car and locking it up. Clutching the strap of her purse with her left paw in an attempt at support as she carried it on her shoulder, she took slow but steady steps towards the front door, with nothing but the streetlights at the sides of the sidewalks illuminating her surroundings. She held her keys in the other paw and tried to unlock the front door as quietly as she possibly could and snuck inside, realizing how terribly late of an hour she had gotten home. Catching a glimpse of the clock in the display of the microwave once she stepped foot in the kitchen for a moment, a nasty sense of disappointment tugged at her, since the past 3 AM mark indicated she had been awake for over twenty hours since the morning she had woken up for work. She felt as useless in this state as the fight had been to her. No end goal whatsoever, and she put her vulnerable, uncontrolled self out there for Brandon of all people to see. In a strange way, it felt as if he had won, having seen what he wanted to see from her, even though he had been arrested for the armed assault he committed in the first place. Nicole owed the stranger big time for how he made sure she was able to go home and get back to safety. She wasn't proud of the way she fought Brandon. She hated it even more now that she remembered the weird mistiness of her consciousness and those odd, physical changes had been a part of it. *What the hell is up with that?* She didn't know whether or not she had to tell Richard about this. He was for sure gonna question where she had been all night, and it didn't feel fair to make him so worried about her all the time. But she really didn't know if she could handle telling him about the weird supernatural occurrences that had been hinting at themselves to her so far. Would a doctor even be able to figure this out? It all seemed so unnatural, but it was very real. She didn't feel that much repercussion from it, though; she thought, since the occurrences might've been worrisome to her due to their unknown origins, but for the rest, she felt quite fine. Perhaps her worries were what weighed on her body for the most part, and her deprivation of proper rest and sleep made it all worse. Sleep, yeah, that was probably it. Maybe her state of exhaustion during their fight was comparable to that one night she had previously experienced it, and caused her to hallucinate a bit. *A bit?* A lot of the sensations surely

felt so incredibly physical, but even if she kept coming up with new theories to cope or push down her worrying, she knew she was gonna run out of coping soon enough. She had to accept she couldn't be in denial about this very real affliction any longer. As long as it wouldn't get worse, it all should've been fine.

Sleep. She needed sleep, and it urged her more as soon as she tripped over her own feet when nearing the door of the bedroom, and her arm hit the wood in an attempt to catch herself to prevent falling over. A brief grimace painted her face in unease, worrying she made too much noise. After she finished her latest thought, the door swung open in an unexpected, rapid way she hadn't prepared for, and her having rested half of her bodyweight against it caused her to lose balance again, awkwardly sidestepping right in front of the tall frame of her husband, who stood in the doorway wearing his pajamas. Her slurred movements from exhaustion made her look nearly drunk, but it was still clear enough that that wasn't the case. Richard's eyes were wide and full of emotion, accompanied by his slightly furrowed brows that turned his face into a concerned frown. Nicole's hair and clothes were a complete mess, the bags under her eyes made her look like a Halloween decoration in the dim lighting from the bedside lamp, but most concerning of all, the partly dried-up blood on her neck and collarbones made it seem more alarming. The two stood in silence for a full minute, and no matter how glad he was to see her back home, her current state deepened the cloud of concern that hovered above him.

Richard: Where the hell have you been?!

He didn't like raising his voice, but struggled to keep his volume down despite trying his very best to keep as quiet as he could. The worry was evident in his speech and drawn all across his body language, making Nicole feel ever more awful about what had happened.

Nicole: I'm so sorry, honey. I should've called you, but it got late before I even thought about it and-

Richard: It's okay. I'm just glad you're here. It does worry me sick when you're away that long at night outside of the times you have a night shift.

Nicole: I know... and I feel so bad for having made you worry so much. I'm sorry...

Richard: Let me get you cleaned up. It's the least you can allow me to do now that you've shown up absolutely beaten up like that. You were just going out to meet with a friend, right? What even happened? Is that why you returned so late?

He couldn't help his questions, as he just needed to know what was going on. He cared so deeply that it almost hurt, but there was nothing else on his mind than making sure she was okay. And now she clearly wasn't. The only thing he could hope for was that she would be willing to answer and explain everything truthfully, without the need to keep hiding information she usually claimed not to want to worry him with. But her silence, more often than not, was what worried him more. She averted her gaze in silence after his questions, not knowing where to start, really. Worst of all, her empty battery made it even more difficult to gather energy to speak. After a few seconds of silence, she turned her face to look at him again, and he shook his head as he felt his own share of tiredness. Quietly, he took her upstairs with him to the bathroom in order to take care of the blood stains as soon as possible. Gently sitting her down on the bathtub's edge, the rabbit looked for a washcloth and rinsed it with cold water before approaching her again. Her hair slightly covered up the cut in her neck, but she knew it was for the better to have him take a look at it. His heart sank at the sight of the wound, and his nose twitched a few times as his ears flopped downward. She had trouble keeping her eyes open and eventually left them to rest closed after taking off her white blouse, which was a bit grayed from dust. It pained him to see the way her chest and sides were bruised, but the cut on her neck was what did it mostly for him. He could tell she had been fighting, and even though he knew she possessed the necessary abilities to defend herself when needed, it was no fun to see any physical damage on her body. The rabbit sat down on his knees and gently washed the blood away from her fur, before dabbing the cold washcloth carefully against the cut to clean it. The feline kept her eyes closed and softly winced a few times as the wet cloth stung, but she allowed him to tend to it with no resistance whatsoever. She took a deep breath after he had grabbed a cotton patch from the cabinet

and completed taking care of it, finally looking up to face him after she had avoided eye contact with him for the past ten minutes.

Nicole: Thank you.

Richard: It's a given, dear. I'm never gonna hesitate taking care of you, even when you try your hardest to fight against it.

Nicole: Ugh, I don't deserve you. Only you can get me to be so passively vulnerable... no matter how much I hate it. But I trust you.

Richard: I know you do, sweet.

He held out his paws to help her get up again, with the way her exhaustion still prevented her from functioning properly, and held her against him for a bit as the light from the bathroom washed them in a slightly cold hue. She breathed in his scent as her nose rested against his chest, and his embrace made her feel safe again.

Richard: Please tell me what has happened once you wake up, okay? You need your rest right now, but I also need you to remember I'm here to help you. Always. Please don't stop expecting yourself to deal with everything on your own if help is something you clearly need.

She took in his words and lacked the energy to speak or even lift her head to look up at this point, so instead she nodded whilst still resting her face against his chest. It was all he needed to ask of her before taking her with him to sleep.

Chapter 14 - Involvement

The Saturday morning had been quieter than it usually was at the dawn of the weekend, where the three siblings usually spent their time hanging out with classmates or tended to each of their own preferred activities. Anais loved spending her weekends mostly reading and watching shows at home, away from the social interactions at school that quickly drained her energy. As for Gumball and Darwin, they often spent that time playing video games if they were home, otherwise tending to whatever mischief they could find themselves in outside. But this weekend seemed to start differently. The volume of chatter hadn't been as high as it often was when the siblings were up and began deciding how they'd be spending their day, but instead all three of them were left in a calmer state by their running curiosity as soon as they hadn't found their mother in the living room the entirety of the morning, and their father had explained to them it had been a long night for her. It was nothing like Nicole for her to be sleeping in late when it had nothing to do with the inverted scheduling of her night shifts. The workaholic with the crippling feeling of responsibility and the itch of constant productivity? Something had definitely happened or was wrong if she stayed in bed for that matter. After the siblings shared lunch at the start of the afternoon, they gathered on the couch with little thought towards their own potential plans for the weekend they usually would've discussed, and kept their father company in the hopes of getting some questions answered. Richard already anticipated their curiosity would be sparked after mentioning Nicole's long night, but didn't want to let them in on the ordeal of her fight to prevent them from getting more worried. Not to mention it would be an adult matter that the kids shouldn't get themselves involved in. The rabbit had already conversed a little bit about it with his wife as soon as he woke up, her having been awake for a little while before realizing she was still too tired and went back to sleep. She had told him as much as she felt comfortable telling, but whilst keeping herself to the promise of letting him in on as much as was needed, feeling like she once again owed an explanation to him. His head had stirred a little with

thoughts the rest of the morning as he had been preparing himself for the day, thinking about the fight that had started with unwillingness on Nicole's end but with the lack of choice since Brandon had threatened her as closely as he had done. But despite the ragged appearance she had that night coming home, it was the nick in her neck that indicated this man meant serious business with wanting to harm his wife, and was what gnawed at his heart the most. If anything, he mostly couldn't stop thinking about the impact it must've had on her, especially after the nasty, continuous harassment and hatred he had been throwing her way. The rabbit's thoughts carried on at the back of his head and put in his best efforts to enlighten the kids of the fact that it wasn't anything of their concern and rather personal on their mother's end, who most likely would've said the same. It didn't feel nice to keep their kids away from knowing, but Richard, as well as Nicole, believed it was for the best.

The clock struck half past three in the afternoon once Nicole emerged from the bedroom door. Since her and her husband's bedroom was located on the first floor, she was met with the sight of her husband and kids residing in the living room first thing when opening the door. She had thrown her robe on top of her pajamas, and her fur still looked messy as ever, but despite her remaining scruffy look, the hours she eventually managed to sleep had done far more for her energy level as she felt a little bit like her old self again. The kids turned their heads to look over once they heard the sound of the door opening, and it didn't take more than a few seconds before they gathered in front of her to greet her with mildly worried gleams in their eyes.

Darwin: Good morning, Mrs. Mom, we missed you!

Gumball: Might as well say afternoon at this point, hah. It is late, even for your usual weekend.

Nicole's attempt at speech was suppressed by a yawn she couldn't hold back, and she needed a second to gather her thoughts inside the remaining grogginess that still clouded her head a little bit. She didn't speak up yet, but instead gently ruffled the fur and scales on top of her kids' heads with one of her paws. Walking towards the dining room to sit down at the table, Gumball and Darwin were the

ones who kept following her around in her path to ask her about what happened, despite their father just having attempted to convince them to stay away from it. Anais had already accepted she wanted to respect her mother's privacy over her own curiosity, and took her father's word for it that it was no matter for her to be involved in, so she sat back down on the couch in the living room with a book she fished from the shelves. Richard had gone into the kitchen in the meantime and returned with a cup of coffee that he handed to his wife before she reached up to his bent posture to kiss him, before he stood up straight again.

Gumball: So... Mom, can we at least know a teensy bit about what happened? Dad mentioned you had a long night, and I can't imagine what must've kept you up for you to sleep in so late.

Nicole's grogginess began to fade, but instead was met with a slight clutch of conflicting emotions that struck her from the curiosity her son expressed, which she already worried her kids would have. What kind of role model would she be if they found out about the frenzied state she had gotten captured in during that ugly fight with Brandon? Was it even fair to bring up the whole feline racism topic to them at their young age already, letting them in on the scrutiny and prejudice their mother had to face for a big part of her life, having them worry about that too? It was rather headache-inducing, and she knew a right time would come for her to tell them more about their role in the world as anthropomorphic animals, specifically, coming from an interspecies family at that, too. But now was not that time. They were too young, and lately Nicole had already felt worried enough about parts of herself that reflected from her own species, which she did not understand thoroughly yet either. If anything, it was hard to express or talk about anything that had to do with the complications the world had in its veins for species that differed a lot from each other. She just wanted to be seen as *herself*, not wanting to be labeled or seen as anything else by her children. She was just *Mom* to them, and all she wanted to be to them.

Gumball: Did you have a fight or something...? That's a patched-up wound on your neck, isn't it?

Her eyes widened for a second as soon as she remembered the

cotton patch Richard had put on her cut, and she averted her gaze while running her fingers through her hair that was parted to the side, brushing the locks forward a little so that they covered the bright white patch that clearly contrasted her dim cerulean fur enough for her son's prying eyes to notice.

Richard: Gumball, didn't I explain it was nothing to pry your mother about before? She's literally been out of bed for maybe a little over five minutes.

Gumball: That's why I wanna know. It's clearly what had her so tired in the first place, right?

Darwin: I wanna be honest, it's worrying us more the longer you guys want to keep quiet about it, Mr. Dad.

Richard sighed as he understood the worry from silence all too well, but didn't want to allow them to bombard Nicole immediately when she most likely was still tired. The feline turned her upper body to face her husband, reassuring him with her softening expression.

Nicole: It's alright, dear. They deserve to know what they need to stop their worries. Mama's okay, and she always will be.

The brothers' expressions softened too as soon as their mother faced them again and already felt a fraction of their worries disappear solely by the demeanor she presented herself in. Richard's brows furrowed slightly in confusion, since he had gotten the impression from their conversation earlier that morning that she didn't want the kids to be worried about her situation with Brandon, having mainly asked for his help to keep them out of it for their own good. But it became much clearer what was going on once she continued talking.

Nicole: Mugger, you guys. That's why I don't want your sweet little faces out alone after dark, as you never know who's out to steal your wallet late at night.

The two boys' eyes widened in disbelief, even if the ever-so nonchalant tone in her voice while explaining it was quite unusual to them.

Gumball: A mugger? You fought a thief? That tried to rob... *you*?

Nicole: Why yes, is that surprising? That's why I'm trying to warn you of the danger, as anyone could be made a potential victim if they expect you to have valuables on you. It's a good thing I was able to fight them off last night without them having had the chance to take anything.

Gumball: I'm just surprised someone tried to rob you out of all people in the first place. Unless it was someone who does not know about your *aura points* in the slightest.

Nicole: My what?

Gumball: Your presence and abilities, basically. It's just that I'm so used to you being the last person I'd ever picture getting attacked on the streets.

Nicole: Well, if someone's armed and capable of enough violence, I am no more than a target as well. I can fight... but I'm not *invincible*.

The wound on her neck throbbed slightly when she spoke those words and tried to suppress a wincing noise, resting her paw on top of the patch for a second.

Darwin: But you beat 'em, right? Then technically they still lost to you; sounds pretty invincible to me, Mrs. Mom.

Gumball: That's so cool, though. Armed, but still beaten by your empty hands? I cannot deny that's neat. Even though I understand you're trying hard to educate us about the potential dangers of the outside, I at least never have to worry about getting robbed when you're with us, Mom.

Darwin: Yeah! It's great to know we're lucky to be in such safe paws from a mother like you.

Both Richard and Nicole were left with their own respective conflicting emotions from the exchange she just had with her sons. The rabbit was surprised by the lie she constructed, but no matter how much it pained him to see her put up such a performative positive demeanor, deep down, he knew there most likely wasn't

any other way to stop their worries before it got worse. He had been thinking of some potential solutions during the time he was awake so far, and hoped to be able to discuss a suggestion with her that his thoughts had mostly hovered around, something he hoped she could be helped with. Meanwhile, Nicole felt the words Darwin spoke stinging in her chest. No matter how endearing she found what her sons had told her, as well as how much it meant to her, the expectation and assumption of her keeping them safe weighed on her way more than it normally did. She had always carried a protective role for her family, something that came naturally to her and something she found most of her pride in. But her state of mind had been changing lately, slightly and subtly, but still enough for her to start feeling bad about that role for some reason. It was almost like deep inside, she struggled to agree that *they were the safest in her paws.* It made her feel a little bit sick, but her fitted upbeat mask stayed on her face perfectly fine. After she had given her adoptive son an appreciative nod, Anais joined her brothers at the dining table, and the three chatted up further, their conversation steering away to another new subject. Nicole took it as an opportunity to get up and leave the table to head into the kitchen, needing to listen to her body as she had been asleep for a long time and lacked food. She didn't care about how late in the afternoon it was; she needed something now and dug into the fridge for a second to collect the condiments and deli meat for a sandwich. It had been the quickest and easiest thing at all times, along with the ham they always kept in storage; it was good enough to maintain her medical dependence on meat, which she had as the only one in the family. It wasn't too big a deal, but her full-blood origins bound her to it by her species, and the herbivorous and mixed nature of her husband and kids gave them a bit more freedom with it. They were able to consume meat fine regardless of anything, as anyone could, but they simply didn't depend on it the same way full-blooded carnivores did in this world. It depended on the type of beast of prey whether or not they would have this dependency wired into them, but it meant that those impacted would become very ill if meat was excluded from their dietary profile. It was no different for Nicole and her own bloodline of felines, as the type of mammalian carnivore that required meat for the vast majority of their diet, with little to no substitution by other foods possible. Even if it was something entirely accepted and

normalized in society as a whole, she couldn't help the mild sense of guilt and unease that had always followed her a little bit for the longest time being alive. It's not that she hated eating meat or would prefer any kind of vegetarian lifestyle if it were possible for her anatomy, but something simply felt... wrong. She didn't feel human enough about it, like most of her anthro peers did, in some way. And no matter how much more natural that more animalistic lens could've been perceived, it somehow felt like the opposite to her. Somehow, the less human she felt about it, the stronger that guilt and unease seemed to be. It was okay, though. She never really dwelled too much on it, but it was still part of her mindset that seemed to stay that way because of the contrast she felt was present between her species and that of her family. Though they never bugged or judged her for it whatsoever. The kids never really thought too deeply about it, as it was their usual for what species their parents were, and Richard never stopped showing his support and consolation for Nicole's nature and what she needed in life, or to live at that. So why did it still bother her sometimes, even if it was only a little? *Kind of stupid, isn't it?*

Richard: Hey, you doing alright?

Her husband's soothing and soft-spoken voice caught her off guard the moment he had approached her at the kitchen counter, where the blue feline sat with her eyes solely focused on the sandwich she was chowing down. The rabbit put his paw on her shoulder and gently caressed the fur underneath her flattened ears once he caught her slight startle. Her left ear twitched, and she turned her head a little to lock her eyes with his. Her expression remained tired as ever.

Nicole: Doing as fine as could be. Even though I've slept in quite late, it's gonna take a few more nights of proper sleep to get rid of those bags under my eyes.

Richard: I get that. I'll be taking care of dinner later again, by the way, so you won't have to worry about that today. I know it's my usual for weekdays, but you really need the rest you can get, honey.

The cat smiled at him with a soft squeeze of her eyes as she shut them for half a second. She then averted her gaze and sighed while

staring at the last piece of bread that was left on her plate.

Nicole: I appreciate it, hun. Thank you.

Richard: Wasn't gonna do anything less. Please let me know if you need help with other things as well, okay? I wanna make sure you're at the lowest level of stress you can be.

Nicole nodded as she chewed up the last bite of her sandwich and got up from the stool to put the plate in the sink to clean up later. Her frame kept still in front of the kitchen window, and she looked outside as her vision aimlessly wandered across the sight of the grass and shed that were surrounded by wooden fencing in their backyard. Richard watched her move in silence as his eyes followed her silhouette until she stopped, and he waited for a moment in anticipation before approaching her again. Her eyelids felt heavy and sticky from the exhaustion that was still present in her, and as soon as she reached for her phone, which she had put on the counter earlier, the indicated time and date on her screen made her exhaustion feel a little deeper, as if she was a little lost in her tracking of time lately. It was the first half of September, and after the next passing of weeks into the new month, her fortieth birthday was right around the corner.

Nicole: Time's going way too fast. Like it always does.

Richard: No doubt about that. It felt like it was yesterday when we moved into this house and settled, heh.

The tall rabbit chuckled as his hesitation to walk up to her disappeared, and he approached from behind to hold her hips. She briefly hummed in amusement before her expression darkened a little bit again.

Nicole: I... I didn't really mean it nostalgically, though, but it's cute.

Richard: Oh, ahw. How did you mean it then?

His soft, slightly high voice trembled in the fur on her neck as he rested his head on her shoulder whilst staying close to her. His scent and warmth were comforting, as they kept her grounded a

little while they had their conversation.

Nicole: Trying to come to terms with aging like I've been trying since a time that was too early to even worry about this. I'm forty next month, and I'm just not so sure if I'm ready for that. Mentally, of course, it's not like my body's gonna freeze in time or anything, hah.

Richard: I know it's something you often worry about. But you know it's kind of an achievement in its own way, right? Everyone gets old, sure, but isn't it admirable how many experiences and good memories you get to carry for getting to a certain age? I personally think it's a beautiful thing worth celebrating.

Nicole: Eh. I mean- thank you, dear. You're right. But that's not the thing I'm worried about, to be frank. Some things in my mind will never make sense, no matter how great or factually positive certain things are in life, especially the inevitable parts like aging.

Richard: Please try to remember you're doing great, honey. Not something that could probably fix your worries right away, but you should at least know that I don't think you're "behind" on anything or haven't done enough before reaching this age. You've done great things, and if your perfectionistic mind won't comprehend that, I won't stop repeating it until it gets through.

Nicole: I'll try. I know I gotta stop fixating on that. But it ain't easy.

Richard: Nothing is ever as easy as it sounds. But that's also why I wanna make your birthday a special one. No matter what your wishes are, I wanna make sure you'll have a good day, and we'll make it all about you to continue to show how much you mean to us.

Nicole: Ahw, I- ahw... Really?

His words struck the right kind of vulnerable strings in her heart as she felt her mind turn to mush in a fraction of a second. No matter if it was another shift in her mood or his consolation easing her head a little bit, she felt fuzzy and warm by what he had been saying. She turned around to face him and buried her face in his

chest, her paws trying to find hold of his tall, chubby figure as he didn't let go of her in the embrace of a hug. He smiled while looking down and caressed her hair with one of his paws as he himself felt a little reassured by the way she could show her softer side again.

Nicole: I would really love that, *cariño*. Dunno if I feel the right kind of energy to host an entire party with guests, though, if that's alright...

Her voice was slightly muffled before she lifted her head to look at his face, and her pupils were a bit more dilated than before.

Richard: We don't need to have a traditional party if you don't feel like it. We can do anything you'd like to do; it'll be your day. It'll be fun even if it's just the five of us.

The feline nodded with a grin and let go of him before walking towards the sink to take a quick sip of water from the faucet. As she did so, Richard felt glad she seemed in a bit of an improved mood by her demeanor and behavior just now, but struggled to decide whether he'd bring up his proposition now or not. On one hand, it would be difficult to do so if she were in an obviously *shitty* mood, but on the other, not knowing how she'd take it made him doubt if it would ruin her current *okayish* mood either. He did know it was for the better to tell her as soon as possible and not let it wait for too long. He saw how she turned around to face him again once she stepped away from the sink and sought another moment of comfort from his presence as she gently pressed her face against his shoulder in a gesture of affection while her arms wrapped around him. His paw found the side of her cheek, and he softly caressed the short fur on her face with his thumb as he looked at her. His mind stirred a little, but there was no doubt in him about taking his chance to let her know now, in case another opportunity would be too far away. Breathing in for a second, he gathered his thoughts and finally spoke up.

Richard: Honey?

Nicole: Hm?

The feline lifted her head to make eye contact with her husband as she still held onto him, her ears perking up a slight bit as curiosity got painted on her face.

Richard: I, uh, have been thinking. Like, worrying a bit if I can admit it. Y'know, this whole situation with Brandon and all... I just don't think this is treating you well, and I wanna help you.

Her expression softened with a mild undertone of mellow, and she averted her gaze for a second as her ears went flat again.

Nicole: Oh, yeah. You're probably right, this isn't the greatest thing to deal with for someone with a fragile head like mine... But you're already helping me out so much, dear. Actually, you really are. You make me feel so safe every time I come back home, and there's no better feeling in this world than knowing you always have my back.

Richard: Heh, it's sweet of you to say that. I'm always glad to be able to support you no matter what. But it's something I can't really explain very well, this feeling of wanting to help *more* somehow. Yet, I am not entirely sure if I am capable enough... I *want to be*, but that's why there's something I've been wanting to talk to you about...

Nicole: Oh? What is it?

Richard: It's just that I don't want you to get the wrong idea or assume my intentions or trust in you... With the way I know, your history wasn't the greatest with those sorts of things...

Nicole's brows furrowed into a slight frown as she was almost entirely sure she knew what he was talking about, but kept silent as she wanted him to say it. Even if it was a little bit upsetting for her, she tried her hardest to compose herself and push her bias away.

Richard: I'm suggesting you get hold of a psychologist. Even if it's just to try it out for a single appointment. I just... am a little bit scared and worried about what these events will or are doing to you, and I want you to be safe.

His wording had a clear undertone of him not knowing entirely how

to express it without accidentally stepping on her toes with a few things. Especially when it was regarding her evident psychological disorders that had been the source of a big chunk of discomfort in her life. But it was still clear that his heart was speaking, and honesty was all Nicole ever wanted in the end. She hadn't made eye contact again with him yet, but forced herself to do so again and ignored the sharp feelings and assumptions that were brewing under her skin. *It's not that he finds me incapable of taking care of myself... It's not that he thinks I'm weak... It's just care. All that it is. Care.* He was right. The fight was the cherry on top of the destructive cake after the repeated assault and aggression she had been enduring from Brandon in recent times, and it *did* affect her in more ways than one. So, getting back into therapy wasn't too bad an idea, but she hadn't been in decades, since teenhood, and the initial thought made her feel a little bit cornered. Even if she was younger, she hadn't always been taken seriously for issues she truly dealt with, and hadn't given clinical psychology another chance since. She had only ever had one single assessment that ended in a better understanding of what mostly troubled her mentally, with the receiving of a formal diagnosis at that. But afterwards, her patience had run dry too soon, and despite the acceptable start, she had lost her trust in the effectiveness of the long-term care that those former workers had suggested for her. Most of her adult life, she had been on her own feet entirely, whilst rarely asking or relying on anyone else for help or support. The narrow expectation towards herself to take care of her own problems alone had been something she needed to get help for in the first place, and in more recent years, Richard had luckily been able to slightly dissolve it a little bit. He used most of his patience trying to convince her she deserved help regardless of anything, and that it, in a sense, would even help him if she allowed him to help her. It would be a large step to go back into psychological care for her, but if it would put her husband at ease and decrease his worries, she found herself being open to giving it another try. If anything, she felt quite guilty still for making him worry about her again in the first place. Richard saw the mild internal struggle in her eyes as she kept silent for a little bit, being able to read her well in this moment. He gently grabbed both sides of her face with his paws, and his pupils dilated as he tried to console her.

Richard: I'm sorry, hun. I knew you would hate to hear this from me... which is why it's been a little hard to know when to bring it up. But please trust me that it's just out of pure care and nothing else. I simply think it's a good thing to try, especially when taking into account what happened. It just... kills me from the inside to see you so exhausted and... sad. You never want to bother anyone with your problems, but that includes me, and I want you to keep talking to me like you've been doing so well lately, remember?

Nicole: It's fine. I know I shouldn't take it personally or attach weird copes to it... But it's just been so long since I've even had an evaluation like that, and I have to admit it's a bit intimidating.

Richard: I'm gonna do everything in my power to help you out with that. I'm not gonna let you deal with anything alone, so there's no doubt I will remain by your side during this as well, alright?

Nicole: You promise that?

Richard: Over my dead body, Nicole.

She nodded in response, and her muscles relaxed a little bit as she hadn't removed her arms from his body this entire time, now holding him tighter as she buried her face into the long fluff above his collar. He caressed the fur on the back of her head in slow strokes as his eyes wandered around the kitchen aimlessly. With a whisper slightly under his breath, he made one last statement.

Richard: Thank you... for giving it a chance.

Chapter 15 - Corvid's desk

The artificial light inside the building felt cold, and like an unsuccessful attempt at setting an ambience it didn't understand. The psychiatric unit of the hospital had a similar design and feel to it once stepping inside, compared to its main building, but didn't feel like too comfortable a place for Nicole to set foot in after so many years. It had somewhat changed from when she had been there as a young adult, but minimal enough for her to still thoroughly remember the feeling at the first step she took inside. It was a miracle for how short the current waiting list was for a first psychological screening, and she realized she was pretty lucky for a worker to be available already. Although it was a Saturday evening, which happened to have a last spot free for her this week after, at the unit that continued their services on the first weekend day as well. Richard walked by her side as he allowed her to hold his paw for as long as she needed to, and the two had barely spoken a word, maintaining the calmness that was present in the air around them as they made their way to the waiting room. Once they sat down, the feline let go of her husband's paw and began to stare into the nothingness in front of her. It was evident her mind already felt clouded, even though the appointment had yet to start, but she wasn't sure what to expect and knew herself well enough to be aware of how much she hated talking about her own problems, even in medical situations. It was hard to bite through her habits of feeling like she needed to do everything on her own, and she felt glad she could rely on her husband for his support, not even feeling so sure if she'd ever have taken this step without him in the first place. Recent years had been quite *fine* for her, how she usually described it, but not excellent. She didn't require excellence for her mental health, but just needed enough fire to get through each day, which she usually did have. But even if that fire had been burning quite well for long enough, sitting in the waiting room at that moment made her think about how much it would take for that fire to be burned out. Again, at that too. It had already burnt out once before. Her spark, her drive to keep going. But she was so young, so clueless and scared of the world she didn't understand yet. She

didn't take herself too seriously in the past when that had happened, and it was mostly the influence from her parents that played a part in that. She felt like she had it "too good" to be mentally ill, and any label of the sort pushed her perfectionism further to the foreground, feeling like she "had to be better" and that there was no excuse for underachieving on anything she had her focus locked on, no matter if she felt under the weather or not. That internal conflict never stopped since it began for her as a kid, and made a big part of her teenhood growing up quite difficult, as she unintentionally pushed away a lot of present issues with that mindset and worked herself into several early burnouts at such a young age already. There wasn't a lot of talk about health in either side of her family, as both the Senicourt and Ross family believed it was a personal matter each person had their own journey with, and those who were afflicted never wanted to be open about it as they feared it would drag their family name down from the prejudice the outside world had. Especially the Senicourts, where almost ironically most of the hereditary issues and medical complications came from, as they fixated a lot on their own reputation as a bloodline and kept their high standards and achievements as a shield to hide themselves from judgement. Nicole never truly knew what history her family had, especially regarding the generations way further back, nor what this reputational priority came from, but she never seemed to question it much in her adult years after a childhood where any of her questions about this were off the table. That was the case until now. Now that her body seemed to show things she had never heard of, and her mind started feeling fragile again.

She thought deeply about the last time she had treatment at the unit, now that she sat in the same waiting room again. Her eyelids felt heavy, but not because of tiredness. In her sedentary position, she was bent a bit forward as her arms rested on her thighs and her paws hung still off the sides of her knees. Some of her hair interrupted her vision as it hung in front of the right side of her face, and her stare was eventually broken once she moved her eyes away from the floor in front of her and towards her lower arms, scanning across them with a blank expression. The worker who had previously helped her out in the past, roughly around the time she was eighteen, had broken the news to her that she was taken in for

a depressive psychotic break, and the last thing she remembered was getting a diagnosis based on the hallucinatory and delusional symptoms she had experienced, once she had gotten through an extensive number of appointments back to back. That day broke her. She felt broken. Once it set in that her mind was labeled with an ailment, she felt like she was no longer out to be perfect; even if she rebelled against that expectation from her parents, it remained something that was engraved into her. *She felt like a lost cause*. She absolutely had refused to let her parents in on it, but had no choice as her medical records would be updated anyway. She expected a lot of scrutiny and judgement from them once they eventually had gotten to talk about it, but it surprised her how much silence and composedness she received instead. They never brought it up to any other family members either, protecting her privacy but also what felt like shielding away the worries they had about their daughter from the others. But there was no form of support either; it was mostly silence. She didn't really know what would've felt worse: judgement or the silence she got instead. It still puzzled her years later what changed and why her parents no longer seemed to uphold the sharp attitude they had not long before. They never had taken her exclaiming about her mental health seriously enough before, nor wanted to talk about it, and instead pushed the idea that it shouldn't drag her performances down no matter what. But despite the silence being less directly torturous than the continuous, aimless discussions could be, it still managed to cause a lot of tension that eventually did lead up to the largest argument she had with them, making her move out rapidly after, all whilst still being in treatment that year. Some memory loss from that time had made it difficult to recall the exact order of events and most events in the first place until she came by again after an extended period of being put on medication. It became clear later that some of her heritage carried a history of psychotic disorders, and her early burnouts back to back were no less of an early contributor to triggering the depressive walking dream state and loss of reality that she ended up in for several months in a row. That passage of time was possibly the worst she had and greatly changed her outlook on her own life, especially so early on, and she would be off on her feet to learn how to deal with it long-term. Even if she always remained a fully functional person with little to no assistance needed for her day-to-day and didn't even need to be medicated chronically, her own

sense of responsibility in most cases often made her forget she lived with this vulnerability she had to pay some attention to. It usually caused her to put too much on her plate, and her emotional distress was what warned her of this most times. Even though she came to understand it a bit better on her own, after refusing to take on the further psychotherapy that was once suggested to her for the long term, she still had a lot to learn. Her eyes continued wandering across the dim cerulean fur on her arms and subconsciously rested on some of her mildly faded scars that peeked through the fuzz in some spots. She hadn't thought about it for a long time. A very long time. The time she started living with Richard for the first time had been challenging in the beginning, but got easier over time, as being on her own with him was a big part of the reason she started being able to heal. He was patient, always had been, and it was everything she ever needed from him. She knew how much it hurt him to see her hurt. Especially when she would hurt herself. It was a tough remnant of the spiral she once had that she tried to get loose from, as it had haunted her for a while until she eventually was able to find better peace and quit. Her scars were both a reminder of those difficult years back to back, but also a symbol of having gotten through that time, something she could find some power in.

Male voice: Good evening, I am looking for Mrs. Watterson?

Richard looked up as he had been keeping his paw on his wife's back in a supportive gesture this time, and was met with the friendly face of a slim male raven who appeared to be the psychologist Nicole had gotten paired with. His height was between that of the rabbit and cat, but his elongated avian legs made him look somewhat tall, and he looked to be in his early thirties with a bit of a young energy surrounding his appearance. A pair of square glasses rested on his face, as a white blouse and light gray jeans marked the base of his outfit, his long, wedge-shaped feathers hanging gracefully behind him, and on top he wore a dark blue blazer as well as a tidy, red tie around his collar. His black feathers were dark as charcoal, but the smooth shimmer on them brought out his features well enough to see, and his beak was slightly angular whilst coated in a rather shiny hue of silver gray. His bright forest green eyes smiled with his friendly grin while he held onto

his clipboard and kept a patient composure overall as he waited for a response at the entrance of the waiting room. Nicole remained a bit lost in thought as she didn't pay attention to the new face that had entered the room and called out her name, and Richard gently nudged her on the side to alert her. She shook her head briefly, and faster than what seemed a single second, the bright and positively presenting mask reformed on her face again as she got up to approach the raven and shake his hand.

Nicole: Greetings, sir, that'll be me. I also brought along my husband, Richard.

After her last sentence, she placed a paw on Richard's shoulder as he came to stand next to her, and he shook the avian's hand as well in the formal greeting. The raven's smile didn't disappear at any moment of their interaction, and rather quickly Nicole already felt a quite welcoming and calming presence from him. Deep down, she had the best interest in giving another care worker a chance to let them click with her, but she couldn't help but need some time to feel entirely comfortable in order to decide whether or not she felt like that click was there. But she had slightly improved hopes from the raven's first impression right away, and kept some of these doubts locked behind the bars of her positivity mask.

Male raven: Nice to meet you both. My name's Erin Warrington, but please feel free to refer to my first name. Shall we head to my office?

Both Nicole and Richard nodded as they didn't really know what either of them was going to expect from the appointment, even if it was just the first so far, and they remained feeling a little bit shy for their own respective reasons. As Erin led them through the hallways towards his office, the bunny allowed his wife to hold his paw as much as she needed to, and she held it as they walked behind the raven. After opening the door, the avian kept it open for the couple to pass through and invited them to sit down on the chairs that were set at the opposite side of his desk. His office was cozily decorated with a few succulent plants set on his desk, collections of handmade beaded necklaces with shiny pendants hanging from a shelf next to the window, a few family photos next to his computer, and some sparkly, colorful stickers spread across the drawers of his

desk cabinets. Both the stickers and family photos gave away that he was a father of two young kids, and the shiny necklaces somewhat felt like a hint towards his corvid nature, even if that was more based on a stereotype than was actually the case. A broad, rectangular window stretched out behind the desk and allowed enough natural light to enter the office, with the setup feeling nice enough to not fall into the category of a "usual" bland therapist office. Before the raven sat down in his chair, he stopped at the door and turned to face the couple.

Erin: Can I offer either of you something to drink before we start?

Nicole didn't want anything, nor felt like she was in a proper state currently to enjoy a nice cup of coffee or tea. Her head was still running on overdrive, no matter how broad she could make the smile on her face; it was all an act to keep her composure and modesty, but deep down she couldn't shake the nerves. But for some reason it felt rude to her to decline his offer, so she briefly eyed her husband next to her to see if he wanted anything himself.

Nicole: Water, please. A cup is fine.

Richard: Some tea would be nice. I'm not picky on flavors, though; any regular kind is good.

Erin nodded warmly before he stepped out of the room to fetch the drinks, as meanwhile Richard turned to face his wife, who returned into the same slightly leaned-over position she had earlier in the waiting room. She found it hard to keep her mind grounded. There was absolutely no reason for her to feel as nervous as she did, but the sheer aversion towards talking about her problems gnawed at her as ever. After all, this was set to be about being able to air her worries from the situation she endured with Brandon in the hopes of being able to process it properly early on and getting medical advice to prevent her mental health from suffering the sharp ends of it as time went on. It brought her a feeling of disgust thinking about admitting the fight with Brandon had been slightly traumatizing. Not directly per se, but the moment she had lost herself in such a deep haze of anger impacted her way more than she could ever expect. It felt very reminiscent of what had happened at the supermarket those months ago, but somehow... difficult for her to

connect the dots. She wasn't sure if she was ready to mention this at any point in her upcoming treatment, though; only time would be able to tell. For now, she was mostly putting in the effort to step out of her comfort zone for the greater good and to help calm her husband's worries, as she felt like she owed this to him after all. She mostly did it for him.

Richard: Water? Are you not gonna get on the caffeine today?

The bunny spoke in a slight jokester tone in the hopes of easing her nerves a little bit, as he could tell she wasn't doing great. There was nothing he wasn't willing to do for her in the support he offered her, and he felt glad and grateful she agreed to get help, despite knowing how she disliked it. He just wanted her to be okay, even if it meant for him to be patient and wait a while for her to open up to it more. There was no rush, and there was nowhere he was gonna go. Not without her.

Nicole: Eh, nah. I've already had a cup earlier today anyway, but I'm not feeling it right now.

Richard: It's all good, just let me know if you need anything, alright? Putting it out there, but I think you're doing great so far.

Nicole scoffed sharply and tried to not let her demeanor become too negative against the ray of sunshine he was doing his best to cast on her darkened clouds. Her frown deepened, the fight on her face remaining evident when trying to smile despite what she was feeling.

Nicole: It hasn't even started. Hah, I don't feel ready... but I have no choice.

Richard: It's still allowed to be said. You're here, sitting in this chair, aren't you? Showing up is half the work, and you got that part done so far.

The feline didn't feel like she needed to be praised for it. Or in general. Praise was something that didn't always come as equally reassuring or motivating to her, depending on the situation and timing. She often felt like a lot of things were part of her

responsibilities and had to naturally be done. If anything, sometimes praise felt rather numb to the infinite blades of perfectionism and expectations that cut her deeply to the point it didn't always change the way she felt about an achievement she had reached or a deed she completed. But despite that numbness showing up now and then, she appreciated hearing it from her husband regardless and knew his intentions behind it were purely well-intended and done from love. She briefly shoved her meandering thoughts out of her main consciousness and put in hidden aggressive efforts to carve the bright smiley expression back onto her face.

Nicole: I appreciate it, sweet. You being by my side is all that I need anyway.

Richard returned a warm smile when she looked up at him, and she gently squeezed his paw in an affectionate gesture as she found her way with hers towards it again and kept holding it as they waited for Erin to return into the room. The raven closed the door behind him after entering the room with the same warm vibrancy he had since the second he had met up with them. He seemed to be a very calm, collected, and polite individual, as someone with a pleasant aura that was nearly expected to be in a medical position as the one he was in. Patience was probably the biggest trait that could be assumed from him and was something that summed up his entire personality pretty well. The cat and rabbit watched him sit down behind his desk to face them after he had set their beverages on the small table in front of their chairs. Nicole felt the nerves eat at her insides and worried about not being able to start on a good note with opening up or any sort of summary for why she had this session in the first place.

Erin: So, to start, I want to welcome the two of you to my office. Besides the formalities, I still would like to reassure you that this is a safe space and any conversation requiring its own time deserves such; comfort at priority. A little more information to know is that I am a psychologist with a side branch in psychiatric medicine, meaning it is my goal to have you consistently taken care of for anything you need, without too many other workers involved for the optimization and focus for your treatment.

Nicole: Thank you, sir- I mean, Erin. Thank you, Erin. Force of habit, those formalities, hah.

The feline felt mildly flustered from her rather hiccupy form of opening sentences, and hoped for her nerves to wind down as soon as possible. The calming presence from Erin did help with slowly easing her thoughts a little bit, and as their conversation started up, she tried to keep her mind at bay with the comforting surroundings of the welcoming decor his office had.

Erin: I've done my homework on your records before the appointment, Nicole, and I found it interesting to find your previous treatment had been at this same unit, but back in 1990, lasting three years. Would you be so kind as to tell a little bit about your background in the sense of things that you find important we keep notice of during progress and, with keeping in mind the passage of time in between, what steered you into the direction of returning to therapy?

Nicole: Well, maybe I might've found it a bit difficult in the past to keep up with treatment in my younger years; during that time I was previously here. I did receive the care and screening that was needed minimally, but have mostly been just fine on my own feet for the rest of the time. There's not really a direct connection from then to now that I'm able to make, to be honest.

Erin nodded and maintained eye contact on a respectable level with her as she spoke, occasionally noticing the reserved and companioning role her husband took as he sat next to her in silence.

Erin: So, if I'm assuming, you had taken the rest of your treatment time to yourself as it was a more preferable way to retain progression?

Nicole: I... like doing things on my own. Once I get to know the ins and outs, tools of the trade, or in general, just ways to self-help, I get going with it. My current goal is honestly more based on a preventative case rather than direct treatment, which is why I am here today. My husband too... He cares. A lot.

A half-smile appeared on her reserved expression as she turned her

head to give her husband a soft look while she spoke those last words, then made eye contact with the psychologist again.

Erin: I am glad to see strong support from your husband. There's nothing more important than having enough caring people surrounding you for consolation in times of need, which is another crucial part of treatment. You're also mentioning a preventative goal. Could you elaborate a bit on that, please?

Nicole: I- uh, have seen the use of reaching out for help whenever something might feel like it's impending for the worse, preventing... mental breaks if anything. Basically, there's been an ongoing situation with someone from work that hasn't been the most pleasant experience, and my husband... and I... worry it could cause me trouble if I don't already try to heal from it.

Erin: Right. I applaud you for wanting to seek that help for something you realized far in advance might come as an issue later, and could undoubtedly help in finding out what works best for you to resolve it. If these... mental breaks are at play, would you mind explaining how these unfold or, if you know, where these stem from?

The feline's gaze averted from the raven's face as she struggled deep within with managing the answers she was doing her best to give him. It just struck her a little differently once it started steering more directly into the direction of her actual *issues* and *feelings*, and she needed more effort to gather herself.

Nicole: They, uh... They were there during this part of my life... When...

Nicole sighed melodramatically as her ears flattened.

Nicole: Psychosis. Something you've probably already caught from my records. But it's why I want to take precautions. My previous treatment had granted me the diagnosis of a schizophrenic disorder, with little to no direct correlation found to the already existing mood *troubles* I've had since I was a kid. Put me on medication for long enough to have the nastiest layer of it being eased up for me, but they couldn't find much more information when it came to

investigation, especially due to... the short amount of time I lasted in treatment. I realize more time could've gotten me more in the "knows", but I simply didn't see the need for it, as I am perfectly capable of living a normal life, haven't experienced anything to a level I wasn't able to manage, and until now would've never considered showing my face here again.

The raven listened intently and wrote two quick lines of diluted information down on his notepad before meeting the feline's eyes again as she now faced him again, and he briefly scanned her body language to tell if she was in discomfort, so he would know where to steer the evaluation next. Nicole reached over to the cup of water on the small table in front of her and took a sip to rid her throat of the dryness.

Erin: I understand. Just letting you know that these more quick evaluation questions were purely off the start so that I can paint a strong enough picture of how I'll be able to assist you best. I also want to let you know I will not be expecting you to pull in information regarding your prior diagnosis you aren't ready to comfortably talk about as part of what we'll be exploring here; unless it ever develops a connection or becomes directly necessary, I will be more than prepared to guide you through that in itself as well. The last thing I want to do is cause discomfort, and it also matters to me to find the best unbiased solutions.

Nicole nodded whilst she raised her head again after setting down her cup, the reassuring tone in his words slowly making her a bit more at ease and ready to keep going. It didn't take many more questions until she eventually started managing to word her sentences better as her explanations and descriptions came to mind a little easier, mostly thanks to the type of energy Erin radiated and the more the feline realized that she felt to be in safer hands. There was still some hesitation left, mostly stemming from her fears of getting disappointed again and the fact that she needed enough time to get to know him. But deep down she felt like something was close to overflowing if she didn't thread with care. A protective shield of a wall was built around how she wanted to open up, as it remained difficult in the long run, but there was still this mildly nagging yet righteous burning passion of emotion that stemmed

from her nature of wanting to be brutally honest about things. It especially was present when it revolved around her own feelings and opinions, where that little compacted flame burned with the urge to break down and say how it was to stand up for herself, which challenged and conflicted with that shielding wall which was meant to prevent her from doing so, with the fears of putting herself out there in vulnerability looming behind it. She began explaining the situation with Brandon and included that it had been annoying for the most part, but wished to find proper signals to recognize when it could ever start impacting her more negatively in the near future. Though there wasn't a word about her frenzied rage that came to be in their fight, as a newer topic she still found hard to even remind herself of, but it sure was a shot in the dark once Nicole began to set foot in bringing up her summarized background during her younger years involving her parents from a tangent about her "mental breaks" she had attempted describing. Erin mentioned it would be a good thing to attempt digging a little bit further if it was for finding out more about potential origins and correlations with her fiery temper that became a prominent subject of this first session. The Brandon conflict made her aware of how quickly her buttons could be pushed, and she figured it was something unavoidable to tackle before she'd ever be even slightly willing to continue further and touch ground on those frenzies. Her rage was something part of her life, and something that couldn't really be disregarded or ignored. Nicole felt chaotic mentally whilst floating through these subjects, which she ended up talking more about than she initially expected, for the better, but it was hard for her mind to keep up somehow. There was just a lot of information she hadn't thought too much about in recent years either, once Erin guided her a little bit through the digging of her past, which made her tear up a little as soon as the retrospective hit her unexpectedly in that moment. She now would worry about how she truly felt about the appointment and her unexpectedly opening heart later, as right now she was fully drowsed in her own waves of deeper, resenting emotions that were clearly so locked away for those years she had been running on her own two feet and could no longer be fully held. Erin's questioning tactics were respectful and patient, but specifically properly done for the right points to be made and shook Nicole to her core in a way no other psychologist had been able to do before. In hindsight, what she ended up having was nothing but

a very necessary cry, and Richard didn't let go of his gentle touch of affection by keeping his paw on her shoulder blades, whilst maintaining his respectful spectating demeanor he had kept the entire session to allow her and Erin to converse properly.